

the lights go out (my heart goes still)

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[fics i gotta read again when they are done](#), [the M in MCYT stands for my god how did i end up in the minecraft fandom again](#), [Crow Cult's DSMP Favorites](#), [Pog MCYT Fics](#), [Dream SMP fics that butter my bread](#), [Carmel's personal picks that made her LOSE HER SHIT](#), [My Gospels AKA Fics So Good It's Hard To Believe They Exist And Are Free](#), [Angsty/Fluffy MCYT works](#), [em's to read list](#), [SBI and DSMP fics i am reading and or read](#), [Dream smp fics that help me live](#), [Wolfis Minecraft Library](#), [sob i love these fics sm](#), [ctommy ctommy chomolo chommy](#), [Technoblade and Instincts: The Saga ft. Tommyinnit](#), [Dsmg fics](#), [DSMP tommy angst](#), [bee's fics for ariel](#), [Pawsitively Awesome Dream SMP Books](#), [Loxe's Collection of Iconic MCYT Girls](#), [UltraRed's Favorites \(mcyt\)](#).

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the lights go out (my heart goes still)

by [curseworm](#)

Summary

With his old home unwelcoming and his new one gone, Tommy is alone. After hours of staggering through the freezing snow, he finds a cabin. Technoblade's cabin.

He hides himself away in the deepest corner he can find, taking only what he needs to survive, wasting away in the cold and the dark. He's petrified at the thought of being found, terrified of what he thinks Technoblade would do to him.

When Techno finds his injured teenage brother huddled in a filthy little cave beneath his basement, the rage he feels is immeasurable. The voices demand blood, and blood he will give them. Dream won't be getting away with this one.

(On the other side of the world, in a country that floats on a man-made lake, Philza gets himself into more than a bit of trouble.)

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post-exile canon-divergent au

Notes

So I've realised that there might be people reading this who are new to the fandom and may not have seen Tommy's exile arc, because things in this fandom move on pretty quickly. While there was a lot that happened during the arc, and to properly catch up to it would require watching nearly a dozen vods, you should be able to gather a lot of what happened from the context of the fic alone. However, this fic starts right in the middle of a scene which is from [this vod](#). If you don't know much about Tommy's exile arc, I would recommend watching it from about 15:00 to 50:00 to give you a better understanding of what's going on when the fic starts.

This fic has also been pretty much completely planned out since December 2020. Back then, things were *very* different in the dsmp lore. It was before Techno abolished the canon SBI family - prior to which there had been repeated instances of Phil referring to Techno and Tommy as his sons, not just Wilbur. It was back when all we knew about the Revive Book was that it was some mysterious MacGuffin that Schlatt had given Dream to get him on his side. It was before Dream went to prison, before we knew anything about immortal!Phil, before TOTSMP had even started. The list goes on (and will continue to grow). If I think it'd work well with the plot, I'll shift things around to fit better with the new lore, but. yeah. Lots of it is out of date.

Fic title is a lyric from *Smell* by Sleeping At Last and a fair few of the chapter titles are names of songs by The Caretaker.

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This fic also has quite a lot of fanart! It's all linked in the notes of the relevant chapter but there's also a [Twitter moment](#) that has all of it that's posted on Twitter. If you want, you could do something like having it open and scrolling through as you read, idk.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

a whisper through ice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was cold.

That was all Tommy knew.

It was an icy numbness that chilled him to his core, left him shivering and shaking and nothing but *cold*. It weighed at his eyelids, dragged at his limbs, made his body heavy, sluggish, and slow. He couldn't feel his right foot. He could only just feel his legs. He could feel his arms, but the stinging, icy pain that lanced through them was almost worse than nothing at all.

The sun was setting rapidly, bathing the snow in warm hues of orange, gold, and pink. It would be beautiful, he supposed, if he had been in any sort of a situation to admire it.

Soon, Tommy knew, he would have more than just the cold to worry about. The monsters that shied away from the light of the sun, that hid in the depths of the earth, that were, to most, little more than myths and legends; they would emerge from their caverns and hollows and begin their nightly hunt for unwary travellers. Anyone they caught would be left as nothing but memories, stories told to deter other would-be explorers from venturing from their towns and villages.

It hadn't been until recently that Tommy had had to worry about these monsters. His whole life, he had always been safe; protected by walls, castles, or even just the people around him. He had always had the gear he needed to eliminate the threat posed by mobs. He had always been assured in the knowledge that if he ever did get injured, he would have his friends to provide him with any help, healing or support he might need.

But as he was now, stripped of his pride, allies, and possessions, with nothing but the ruined clothes on his back and the flimsy stone sword he had managed to craft, an encounter with even just one mob may well prove fatal.

Tommy didn't know how much he cared.

He wasn't even sure what he was looking for. He knew that he had been running, running, that he had felt an overwhelming sense of betrayal, anger, and fear. But then he had ventured into the snow, and the chill had bitten at his body and his mind, leaving him as nothing but a hollow, lethargic shell.

He was so tired.

It was getting harder to make out his surroundings in the dying light of the sunset. Even then, all Tommy could see was an endless plain of white stretching around him, spanning to the

horizon in every direction. He was looking for safety, for some sort of shelter. But... it was hopeless, wasn't it?

He tried to shove the thought out of his head, but it was persistent. It lingered at the end of his consciousness as he continued to trudge forward, solidifying with each nightmarish minute that ticked by, warping into a voice that mocked his plight, laughed at his pain, crowed about the futility of his search. It almost sounded like Dream.

Tommy stumbled as his foot caught on a buried rock and he was sent tumbling to the ground. He let out a choked cry as his bare arms contacted the snow, fighting the tears that threatened to well in his eyes. He lay there, sprawled on the snowy ground, holding back tears and the thoughts and memories that threatened to come crashing down. He wouldn't cry. He wouldn't *let* himself cry.

Dream blowing up L'Manberg. Wilbur blowing up Manberg. Dream blowing up Logstedshire. It was all the same. It was always the same.

Tommy shut his eyes tightly. No. He wouldn't, *couldn't* think of that. He had to be strong. He had to keep going.

But what was the point? It was getting late, it was getting dark, and he was in no state to fight the monsters that would bring with it. Maybe he could sleep, just for a moment. He was already lying on the ground, and the snow was soft, and its chill had faded into a static numbness. It would be nice, really, a bit of rest after so many sleepless nights. It would only take five minutes.

There was another voice in his head now, pushing against the one that continued to jeer at him. It screamed at him to keep going, shouted that he couldn't give up, not now, not after everything. This one sounded like Tubbo.

But he was so, so tired.

Something small, round, and hard was digging into his sternum. It was uncomfortable. It was annoying. Tommy rolled over and reached up to his chest, his hands fumbling at the nuisance hanging from his neck. He managed to get a grip on it and tore his hand back. A chain snapped.

He was holding a compass. The freezing metal bit at his hand. It was cold and painful and Tommy wanted to drop it.

But no, wait, that was wrong. He couldn't do that. It was his Tubbo compass. It was Tubbo.

He pressed the latch with a trembling finger and stared down at the face of the compass as it popped open, at the needle that pointed resolutely to an unreachable place, the home he would never again be able to return to. He traced the words engraved on the compass' case. *Your Tubbo.*

He had to keep going.

Tommy grit his chattering teeth together, pressed his hands against the snowy ground, shoved himself to his feet.

He couldn't give up.

He took one trembling step forward, then another, then another, taking solace in the presence of the icy compass clutched in his hand.

He could do this.

He didn't know how far he pushed himself before something new caught his attention; a little streak standing against the empty horizon. He squinted at it, and it took a moment, but his eyes widened as he realised what exactly he was looking at. His heart leapt to his throat as a bubble of hope rose in his chest. It was a warm glow of light, just barely visible, previously hidden by the blazing sunset.

The light held a promise of safety and warmth. Tommy would go there. He would get there. He had to get there.

Maybe it was a village, or a house, or an igloo. Maybe it was some sort of shelter.

It had to be a village, or a house, or an igloo. It had to be some sort of shelter.

He couldn't bring himself even consider the possibility of it being a lava pit or a ruined portal.

Even as Tommy staggered forward, towards the light, it didn't seem to grow any closer. It wavered in and out of focus—one second it was there, the next it had flickered out of existence. He clenched his eyes shut, shook his head, and opened them again.

The light was there.

He wasn't imagining it.

He couldn't be imagining it.

If he had been more lucid or there had been more visibility, he might have noticed the pit of turtles that he passed on his right. He might have seen the bee farm that stretched to his left. He might have realised, before he actually arrived, what he was walking towards. But as it was, he only had eyes for the light that finally seemed to be growing larger, brighter, more in focus. Tommy didn't know when it had happened but at some point, it had turned from a vague glow to the unmistakable silhouette of a structure. A cabin of sorts. Safety. He would be safe.

Tommy had stopped shivering. He was too cold to shiver. His hand was numb from holding the compass. His foot was numb from its prolonged contact with the snow.

But his heart held a warm glow of hope.

It was so close, now. Just a few more steps.

He would be okay.

He would be *okay*.

He caught sight of the horse outside the house.

Even in his dazed, hypothermic state, Tommy managed to recognise it as Technoblade's prized horse.

His heart plummeted.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment if you find any typos/syntax error type things. This goes for the whole fic. I want to fix them.

THIS CHAPTER HAS SOME [FANART](#) BY SUGARFUR, OF TOMMY LYING IN THE SNOW! GO CHECK IT OUT!!

WE'VE GOT [ANOTHER](#), THIS ONE BY SILVEN, OF TOMMY CLUTCHING THE COMPASS!

quiet internal rebellions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy's eyes were wide with dismay and despair as he gazed at the horse clad in a suit of diamond horse armour, standing calmly within a pen of dark oak. The animal stared back at him, its ears perked curiously, its warm eyes full of... something. It was a horse, for god's sake. It's not like Tommy knew how to decipher horse emotions.

He away looked from the animal, gazed up to the cabin. Of all the people he could find, it had to be Technoblade. Fucking Technoblade, his estranged, hated brother.

It was just his luck.

The knowledge of who owned this cabin had replaced his hope, which had long since died a bitter death in the cage of his ribs, with hollow despair, an all-encompassing chill that went far past the literal cold that still permeated his body. The urge to cry was nearly overwhelming as he stood, alone, outside the house that held everything he needed but offered none of it.

Of course he was alone.

He was always alone.

Tommy drew himself up, trying to adopt a facade of bravado—even if only for himself. He pointed a finger at the horse. “You,” he said, not noticing the slur in his speech or the tremble in his hand, “keep quiet.”

The horse whickered softly, sounding almost concerned. Tommy scowled at it.

He turned from the animal and stared back up at Techno's house, sparing one last longing gaze at the light that streamed through the windows and the smoke that wafted from the chimney. He could practically feel the warmth and comfort that radiated from the cracks in the wood and the stone.

But he couldn't stay here.

Dream had proven that no one cared for him. The man hadn't been his friend, Tommy knew that. He knew that Dream had lied to him, manipulated him, hurt him. But he also hadn't been wrong. People despised Tommy—none more so than Techno, who had, last they'd met, screamed at him to die like a hero before loosing a pack of withers on him.

Techno would kill Tommy if he found him trespassing in his house.

So Tommy just had to keep walking. The prospect of remaining outside in the cold and dark brought rise to dread like no other, but he had no choice. Maybe there would be a village nearby he could go to. Maybe he would be able to survive.

No, you won't. You know you won't. Go to the cabin. If you leave, you'll die, whispered the same voice from before, the one that sounded like Tubbo. This time, Tommy ignored it, dragging his feet through the snow as he stepped away from Techno's house. He didn't want to do this. He *really* didn't want to do this. He wanted shelter, he wanted comfort and safety.

But he wouldn't find that here.

Tommy let out a shaky sigh, dropped his head to his chest, and took a few more stumbling steps away from the cabin.

He managed to miss the rattling that sounded behind him.

He managed to miss the groaning stretch of a bow being drawn.

He did not, however, manage to miss the burning pain of the arrow that lodged itself in his shoulder. It pierced through both his skin and the numbness that had fallen over him, sending a blazing spike of agony lancing through his back. He staggered to the side with a choked scream, the projectile's momentum sending him reeling. He turned wide, pain-filled eyes to his attacker and came face-to-face with the empty, grinning skull of a stray, already reaching back to its quiver for a second shot.

The slowness effect of the stray's arrow was already taking its toll on Tommy as he tried to back away from the oncoming monster. Its glowing eye sockets bored holes into him, drab grey rags hanging loosely from its skeletal form, the air around its quiver dense with the harmful potion its arrows were infused with.

Tommy fumbled for his stone sword, shakily raising the weapon as soon as he got a good grip on the hilt. He bit back a sob as his shoulder shrieked in protest at the movement, but this was the only sort of defense he had. He was weak, slow, and injured. And, god, a stone sword as flimsy as his was nothing. He was practically weaponless too.

He couldn't fight this.

What would be the point?

He'd fight, and he'd lose, and he'd die, and that would be it.

Why bother trying in the first place?

A splintering crash snapped Tommy from his despair, the otherwise silent night filled quite suddenly by an enraged neigh. He flinched in surprise, twisting sharply, instinctively, his shock forcing him into a swift movement that he otherwise wouldn't have been able to make—and also saving him from the second arrow shot by the stray. It whizzed within inches of his head, so close that he could feel the wind of it blowing through his hair, and embedded itself in the stone bricks of the cabin behind him.

Tommy's arm dropped down to his side, his grip on his sword loosening as he watched, slack-jawed, as Technoblade's horse leaped over him. Powerful hooves crashed into the

stray's skull, crushing bone and instantly destroying the magic that held the monster together. It fell apart, bones, rags, and arrows landing in a heap on the snow.

Tommy's eyes were the size of ender pearls as the horse tossed its head back, letting out a satisfied huff. It turned to look at him and he quickly dropped his sword, raising his hands placatingly, gritting his teeth against the pain that the hasty movement sent shooting through his back and shoulder.

In a way, the burning pain was refreshing after so long in the cold. And god, was he cold. He had been standing still for too long. He had to keep moving.

"Hey, hey, it's ok," Tommy said hurriedly, almost nervously, his words once again blending together. "I-I'm going now. I'm not going to hurt you, or- or Techno. Just—" Tommy cringed back as the horse took a step forward, clenching his eyes shut, bracing for the worst. This animal could easily kill him if it so desired. It had the power to end his pathetic existence with one fell stomp of its hooves—and what was stopping it? It would be just like Techno to choose a horse that held a grudge just as violently as he did. A muzzle butted into his stomach and Tommy flinched, tensing for pain that never came. Instead, it bumped into him again, gently nudging him towards the house. Tommy hesitantly opened his eyes. "W-what?"

The horse let out a breathy whicker. It almost sounded exasperated, ridiculous as the idea was. It butted its head against his torso again, forcing him to take a staggering step towards the house.

"Oh."

Well... if the horse insisted, then Tommy wouldn't argue. He *couldn't* argue, really, as proven by the splintered remains of the dark oak fence and the pile of bones that lay on the snow. This horse was one that got what it wanted.

He ascended the stairs of the cabin with sluggish steps, weighed down by the effects of the slowness arrow he'd been shot with. He glanced back hesitantly once he reached the porch. This was trespassing. This could only end badly.

The horse let out an encouraging little whinny.

The heartening support paired with the relentless throbbing of his shoulder—he needed to treat his wound, and soon—was what drove Tommy to finally decide to enter the cabin.

So he turned back and, holding his breath, pushed open the door.

Chapter End Notes

I've always liked the idea that Carl is like, uncannily intelligent. After all, Techno would never settle for an animal that isn't pretty much sentient.

THIS CHAPTER HAS SOME [FANART](#), AGAIN BY THE AMAZING SUGARFUR,
OF CARL PUSHING TOMMY TOWARDS THE CABIN!! GO GIVE SUGAR THE
ATTENTION THEY DESERVE!!

to the conflicted and the brave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy let out an involuntary gasp as a blast of hot air wafted through the open door. His skin blazed as the heat from the merrily crackling fire, endlessly burning on a netherrack base, washed over him—such a sudden, stark contrast to the cold he'd been in for hours before. Strangely enough, though, his bare right foot seemed unaffected by the warmth, remaining just as numb as it had been before. A quick glance down revealed the foot to be a pale, pale white, completely bloodless. That probably wasn't a good sign.

He would treat it later.

Tommy edged hesitantly into the cabin, wincing as the heat only intensified. This was such a horrible idea. He threw another glance back at the horse, who was watching him expectantly. Tommy thought that, if it possessed the ability to do so, it would have raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, alright,” he muttered, taking another slow step forward and shutting the door gently behind him. The slowness arrow was finally starting to wear off, though the pain from the wound was still a persistent, sharp ringing in Tommy's awareness.

He'd treat that later, too.

For now, he needed a safe spot to hide, to recover, to regain his wits and grow strong enough to live without needing to leech off Techno's supplies. The lack of response at his entry seemed to indicate that, despite the blazing fire, no one was home. But that could change at any moment, so Tommy would make a pit somewhere, live as some kind of raccoon within the walls so he wouldn't be found. It was disgraceful, really, when he considered just how far he'd fallen. He decided not to consider it.

Tommy scanned the room, instantly noting the chests that lined the far wall. He stumbled over to them, reaching out with shaking fingers and prying open one of the lids. Inside, lined in neat rows, was an assortment of dusty potion bottles. Tommy reached in unthinkingly, pulled one of them out, unstopped it, and chugged its contents.

It had seemed like a good idea.

Potions, as they were brewed using blaze power, left the user feeling warm and fuzzy alongside whatever power they granted—and all boon potions, when ingested and not inhaled in the form of splash potions or injected in the form of tipped arrows, were also accompanied by a temporary ‘high,’ of sorts.

Resistance potions, for example, as well as hardening the skin of the drinker, also momentarily dulled their nerves and lessened any pain they felt. This gave them a feeling of invincibility, and could often lead to rash, reckless actions that left them injured even through the protection the resistance offered. Strength potions, like the one Tommy had just

thoughtlessly drunk, invigorated the user and left them feeling like they had the power to take on just about anything, which could lead to carelessness and hubris.

It was this ‘high,’ different for all boon potions, yet always there in some form or another, and the consequences that came with using too many potions too quickly, that had many potions classified as dangerous, illegal for civilian use outside of dire situations.

And it was this ‘high’ that Tommy felt now—magnified tenfold by how weak and vulnerable he had previously been feeling. Renewed strength burned through his veins, firing up his aching muscles, melting away the cold that had crusted around his bones. He let his hand drop to his side, allowed his fingers to loosen around the neck of the bottle, and flinched as the glass shattered against the tiled ground. Tommy stared down at it. He blinked, once, before shrugging and going back to the potions, searching until he found a pink-tinged bottle he knew to be healing, which he grabbed, uncorked, and drank. Potions of healing, rather unintuitively, acted more as momentary painkillers than actual treatments. Right now, however, that numbness was exactly what Tommy needed.

He moved over to the next chest and pulled it open. Ender pearls. Another jackpot. Tommy grinned down at the glossy blue-green orbs, reached down, and grabbed a handful. When he needed to get away, these would be perfect. He shoved them into his pockets and moved to another container.

It was full of bows, crossbows, and arrows. Tommy reached in and fished out an especially glowy enchanted crossbow. Now he’d be able to defend himself too.

His grin widened as the next chest shone with golden apples. He grabbed one stack, paused, and then took another for good measure. Rooting through the other chests gained him the basics he’d need to survive—wood, stone, coal, wool, a few packets of beef jerky, and a couple of canteens of water—as well as an enchanted diamond sword, a set of diamond armour, and a stack of blaze rods. The warmth blaze rods radiated was something he was sorely in need of, after all.

Now all he needed was a little hole to hide away in.

He wasn’t really sure what he’d been worried about. Even if someone did find his hidey-hole and tried to take away his stuff—like they always did, like they *always* did—he’d be able to fight them off with all this gear and the strength he possessed.

Tommy had seen a pickaxe in one of the chests, so he went back to it and pulled out the tool. Breaking through the stone below his feet seemed like a good idea, so that’s exactly what he did. Falling through the floor and into Techno’s basement wasn’t something he could say he expected.

Tommy bit back a cry as the impact of landing jolted through his legs and the arrowhead was jostled roughly in his shoulder, burning against the healing potion's numbness. “Fuck,” he swore, gritting his teeth and reaching back to prod at the tender wound. It only served to bloody his hands and intensify the pain.

A quiet moo drew his attention to a lone cow that stood in the basement. It regarded disinterestedly him for a moment before turning away with a second, decidedly dismissive moo. A zombified piglin and a skeleton, trapped behind walls of glass, groaned and rattled respectively. They both wore jack-o'-lanterns as helmets.

They were probably some ridiculous prize of Techno's. Tommy didn't care either way.

He used his dominant, uninjured, right arm to dig his way into the ground, not having learned from five seconds ago when he'd done the exact same thing and it had sent him plummeting into a secret room. The strength that enhanced his muscles and the enchantments on the pickaxe he'd grabbed made mining down and fashioning a rough cave beneath Techno's base a quick, easy job. Tommy was left feeling rather tired once he finished, though; his arms burning in protest of his movements, his shoulder throbbing with a persistent ache. The potion effects were beginning to wear off.

He shoved a workbench into one corner of his little residence and used it to craft some chests and ladders.

He placed the ladders. He placed the chests. His hands shook as he dumped his stolen items into the chests.

He stared down at the gapples, ender pearls, and gear; still and silent for a moment before the reality of his reckless, stupid actions hit him like a sledgehammer. His stomach dropped as he properly realised what he'd just done, horror rising in his throat, feeling and tasting just as foul as bile.

If Technoblade returned and his valuables were missing, he'd know there was a thief in his house.

If he knew, then it would be all over for Tommy.

Why the fuck had he drunk that potion? Why had he allowed himself to get carried away and steal all these useless, *obvious* items?

Tommy picked up the items in his chest and shoved them back into his pockets. He couldn't keep the gapples. He couldn't keep the ender pearls. He couldn't keep anything with any sort of meaningful value.

If Dream had reacted badly to finding chests full of Tommy's *own* items hidden under Logstedshire, he shuddered to think of what Techno would do if he found Tommy squatting under his house, hiding away *stolen* valuables.

Tommy looked up at the roughly hewn tunnel that led into his shitty little cave.

If Techno found him here, he would probably want to get rid of his things, just like Dream had. But maybe Techno wouldn't be gracious enough to allow Tommy to scramble out of this pit before he blew it up. Maybe he'd drop the TNT down into the cave while Tommy was still trapped inside, ignoring his brother's begging and then ignoring his screams as the explosions tore him limb-from-limb. Maybe that would be how Tommy lost his last life.

(What had Dream said, his hand gripping the collar of Tommy's shirt, ignoring the way the teen scrabbled desperately at his arm, ignoring his terrified pleas for mercy, as he held him suspended over the pit that he'd already rigged with TNT?

"How about you get in the hole, Tommy?")

But... surely his brother would be more lenient if Tommy didn't take anything—or, well, none of the superfluous items he'd stolen. He could at least keep the raw materials, the food, and the water he needed to survive. If he didn't, he would die anyway. So even if Techno found and killed him for the robbery, it's not like he would've fared much better had he left them behind.

Tommy clamoured up the ladder, ignoring the way his fingers, once again feeling the bite of the cold, shook as he grabbed the rungs, ignoring the lethargy that had been pushed away by the potion but was finally returning to weigh down at his muscles, ignoring the pain that shot through his shoulder as he moved his arm and jostled the arrow. He dropped the gapples back into a chest before reaching into his pockets and depositing all his other stolen valuables. He stared at them for one long moment before shutting the chest with finality he wouldn't undo. He would survive without them. He would treat his injuries on his own, without the help of magic or potions.

He was strong enough to do that. Right?

Tommy let out a quiet, bitter laugh. Of course he wasn't. He knew that, now that the false bravado of the strength potion had worn off. Who was he kidding, thinking he could do anything alone? Certainly not himself.

But there was nothing else to it.

Tommy hesitated before he dropped back through the hole in the floor. The heat of the fire didn't reach the basement, let alone his cave. He would be so cold down there. But Techno could return at any moment, and he needed to hide. Tommy lowered his head and jumped down, bracing himself for the impact. Standing in the basement, he reached up and replaced the part of the floor he'd destroyed. He then climbed back down his ladder and dragged a slab of stone over the entranceway to his cave.

The air was frigid.

Tommy slunk over to his chest and pulled out some wood and coal. He fashioned a rough torch and lit it with trembling fingers. The heat it radiated paled in comparison to the warmth of the blazing fire above, but it illuminated his cave well enough to let him see how pathetic it truly was.

Tommy slumped against the wall and sank into a sitting position, clutching the tattered remains of his clothes around himself in some futile attempt to retain body heat. After a moment, he reached out an arm and snagged one of the bundles of wool he'd taken, hugging it tightly to his chest. He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out his compass.

He traced the words engraved on the compass' iron case.

Your Tubbo.

His chest ached with a pain that was, for once, not physical. He missed Tubbo. He missed L'Manberg. He missed the past.

Tommy's eyes slipped shut.

He was so cold. All the warmth from the fireplace above had been leeched away by the harsh stone walls and the chill that came with being this deep underground.

The arrow still buried in his shoulder sent hot flares of pain stabbing through his back, its serrated edges making a mess of the wound as Tommy's continuous movements shifted it around. His right foot was still numb, the skin even paler than it had been, now hardened and freezing to the touch.

He needed to treat his wounds, but he was exhausted.

Maybe he could sleep for a moment first.

Just a few minutes couldn't hurt.

Chapter End Notes

ONCE AGAIN, SUGARFUR HAS DRAWN SOME EPIC [FANART](#) FOR THIS CHAPTER, OF THE PART WHERE TOMMY REALISES WHAT HE'S DONE!! IT'S VERY GOOD—GO CHECK IT OUT!!

darkened cavern, void of lucidity

Chapter Notes

Not sure if this is needed, but warning for sickness this chapter. Nausea, vomiting, fever, etc.

Also medical malpractices because Tommy has no idea what the fuck he's doing

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy came to with a soft groan. He didn't know how long had passed.

He had managed to doze, in fits and starts, sitting back against the lumpy rock wall. He was terribly tired, worn out from being so scared for so long. His arrow wound, still burning with pain, kept stabbing him awake again and again, and each time he would drift between sleep and wakefulness for a while before slumber dragged him down once more.

Tommy's back ached, screeching in protest as he went to sit up, and his shoulder throbbed with a powerful, consistent pain that faded to a static numbness as it traveled down his arm. His head felt like it had been filled with cotton, and when he tried to open his eyes they felt scratchy and leaden.

Tommy scrunched his face up in displeasure and rolled over, deciding that he'd rather fall back asleep than deal with the discomfort that plagued him. What he didn't expect was the sharp, jagged agony that lanced up his back as he moved. Tommy lurched up with a strangled scream. His eyes snapped open, the sudden, unexpected pain enough for him to temporarily shake off the lethargy that had settled in his bones.

It was pitch black.

Sometime during his sleep, his flimsy torch had burnt down to embers.

Tommy ground his teeth together as the pain slowly levelled out, though the persistent ache still refused to fade. He reached out blindly into the darkness, searching for something he could use to light up the cave. His arm felt stiff and heavy as he moved it, and when his hand finally contacted the lid of the chest, it took far longer than usual for his fumbling fingers to unlatch and open it.

He leaned forward slowly, careful to avoid doing anything that could cause more undue pain, and stuck his hand into the chest. He managed to grab another few lumps of coal and some of the sticks he'd made before he slept, and crafted them into another set of torches.

His horrible situation was once again illuminated by the feeble, flickering light of the fire. Tommy sighed and sank back against the wall, angling his injured shoulder away from the

rock. He reached his right hand back and tenderly felt at the wound, barely biting back a cry as the arrow shifted with another swell of pain.

“No, no, I’ll leave that there for now,” he muttered, not wanting to deal with the agony he knew would result from actually trying to pull the arrow out. It wasn’t like he had any sort of bandages or potions to treat the wound with, anyway.

Now, for the other problem he had noted. Tommy leaned over to examine his still bare right foot, bringing one of the torches close enough to light it up well. The pale white had developed into a rather worrying shade of red, and when Tommy tried to move his toes he found that he couldn’t.

He rested a hand on his foot and found that the skin was stiff and still incredibly cold, and that it couldn’t actually feel the touch.

Had Tommy been one to pay attention to his classes and the impromptu first-aid lessons he’d been given during the original revolution, he would have recognised the telltale symptoms of frostbite. He would have known not to rub or massage the frostbitten area. He would have known not to use dry heat—such as that of a fire—to warm the skin. He would have known that the best, and quite possibly only, way to save his foot would be to venture back into the warmth of Techno’s cabin and hope that the man didn’t return while the tissues in his foot thawed.

During the lesson on treating frostbite Tommy had, however, been too busy contemplating how much of a Big Man he was. So, as it was, he knew none of that information. And so, as it was, he decided that the best way to help his foot would be to bring the torch close to the frozen skin and hope that the heat allowed it to warm up.

Frostbitten tissue burnt far more easily than normal, and its lack of sensation meant that it was difficult for the affected person to realise how much damage they might be doing. In the dim lighting of the cave especially, Tommy was unable to see as the flames licked at the sole of his foot and his skin blistered and blackened and began to peel.

After a few moments of this, Tommy withdrew the torch and set it back into the ground. He rubbed a hand against his foot, hoping that the friction would warm it up further. The flames had left the skin hot to the touch, which was probably a good sign.

He stopped after he decided that he’d done enough, then grabbed one of his bundles of wool and tore off a strip, wrapping it around his foot in an effort to keep it warm. That would have to do.

He allowed himself a moment’s respite before he reached out and picked up a strip of jerky. He gnawed at it slowly, considering the steps he’d take from here.

It shouldn’t take too long for him to heal up. A week, at most. During that time, Techno would most likely return to his home. Tommy would be safe here, though. Techno wouldn’t be able to find him, probably wouldn’t even realise there was anyone else in his house. And then it would be a simple waiting game to find the perfect time to sneak out.

Tommy swallowed the jerky with a self-satisfied nod. He grabbed one of his water canteens and took a swig.

Yeah. That was right. He'd be fine.

Tommy pulled out his compass again and gazed down at it, once again tracing the words engraved on its shell.

He *had* to be fine. Tubbo was waiting for him.

Tommy settled back against the wall, closed his eyes and allowed himself to relax.

He just had to wait this one out.

-0-

The next time Tommy awoke, it was to an aching chest, a parched throat, and a rolling stomach.

He blinked slowly, feeling disoriented and groggy. Tommy pressed a hand against his stomach as it lurched uncomfortably, wondering what was wrong. He tried to push himself up from where he'd slid down the rock, and realised too late that the action would only serve to further upset his stomach and magnify the sickness he was feeling.

He dropped back against the wall with a groan. The throbbing in his shoulder managed to be even worse than it had been last time. The cold seemed to bite even deeper into his skin. The torches had once again burnt down to little stubs.

Nausea clawed at Tommy's throat, and though he tried to force down the bile, it was a futile effort. He lurched forward suddenly, coughing, choking, gagging on the chunks of partially digested jerky that spewed from his mouth. He took a gasping breath, and flinched as a jagged pain shot through his chest. His stomach continued contracting violently, forcing everything up and out. His face was white and dripping with bile and sweat. The pungent stench invaded his nostrils and he continued to heave even after there was nothing left to go.

Only once the bout of vomiting was over was Tommy allowed to slump bonelessly against the wall. He tried taking a few deep breaths to calm himself down, but each one he took was only rewarded by more agony stabbing through his chest.

So instead, Tommy resorted to taking quick, shallow breaths as he waited for his stomach to settle and the pain to ebb away from his chest.

He reached out and grabbed a canteen, gulping down some water to wash away the vile taste of vomit and sate his parched throat.

After stoppering the canteen again and placing it to the side, Tommy shuddered and drew his hands close to his chest. He rubbed them together in an attempt to warm them up. The chill had seeped deep into his bones.

He quickly slipped into another restless sleep.

-0-

Tommy's third awakening was accompanied by a blazing fever, a pounding headache, and sweat that poured from his skin and pooled onto the stone below him. He raised a hand and placed it against his forehead, wincing as it contacted the burning skin.

Well. Wasn't that just great?

He groped blindly into the darkened cave, snagging the canteen from where it sat against the wall. He managed to open it, raised it slowly, and then poured its contents all over his head. The cold water splashed over his hair, soaking it and instantly providing him with relief from his feverish state.

He let out a sigh.

Even though Tommy didn't know how long he'd been down here, he did know that he should probably be feeling hungry. But the only thing his stomach churned with was a dull nausea. Maybe it hadn't been very long, then, if hunger hadn't set in yet.

Maybe he could rest for a bit longer.

-0-

Tommy woke with a dry, hacking, heaving cough and an agony that lanced through his chest and throat. He gasped for breath, trying and struggling to inhale any air. Each cough was accompanied by a hoarse, tugging pain in his lungs, as if he were trying to expel his insides.

It seemed like an eternity passed before the coughing fit passed, and by the time it was over Tommy was curled against the wall of the darkened cave, hugging his knees to his chest and rocking back and forward.

He just wanted to be warm.

He just wanted to be safe.

Why was that so much to ask for?

-0-

Delirium followed Tommy's fifth venture into the waking world. He blinked and glanced around, confused, his eyes glassy from the fever that raged within him.

Where was he?

Tommy placed his right hand against the wall in preparation to push himself up and had to bite back a scream from the agony that resulted from the movement. He cradled the arm close to his chest, not even trying to fight back the tears that rose.

Where was Tubbo?

Tommy wasn't sure why the thought of his friend brought rise to a wave of grief that rose up and crashed against his heart. He wasn't sure he wanted to know why.

He clenched his eyes shut.

He slipped back under.

-0-

The shaft of the arrow snapped as Tommy, possessed by a nightmare, flung his arm out and rolled onto his side.

The pain was enough to rouse him, but the consciousness only lasted a few moments.

The claws of sickness dragged him back down.

-0-

Tommy woke several more times, to cough or to vomit or to just sit huddled in his feverish, delirious state.

He was going to die here. He was going to rot away in this shitty cave, forsaken by anyone who had ever claimed to care for him. His corpse would fade into a skeleton, which would fade into dust, which would fade into nothing.

He had been forgotten.

-0-

The lucidity Tommy felt when he woke next was something he hadn't felt since he had climbed into this hellhole.

His head pounded, his shoulder throbbed, his throat ached, and a thousand other pains plagued him. They all combined into a cacophony of pain and discomfort, one that stifled all his other senses and threatened to overwhelm him. (His right foot, though, remained disturbingly numb.)

But something had woken him.

Something had happened.

His head was, for once, clear enough for him to have coherent thoughts. Best put it to use.

Tommy remained deathly still where he sat against the wall, knowing that any movement could bring rise to an agony that would blind him and kill any chance of him finding what had woken him.

He strained his ears.

There was a voice; loud, deep, shouting at something. The only word Tommy could reliably make out was a name. 'Carl.'

The speaker fell silent. Tommy listened harder.

Footsteps echoed on the floor above him.

Tommy's eyes widened as he realised what was happening.

Oh god.

Oh no.

His pulse quickened. His breath shallowed. Terror pooled into his lungs, threatening to choke him.

He was dead.

He was so dead.

(It would be kinder than what life had become.)

Tommy waited, breath lodged in his chest, as the footsteps creaked and groaned above him.

He had to do something.

He couldn't just wait here like a sitting duck, a fish in a barrel.

Tommy leaned over and pushed himself to his feet. The sharp adrenaline coursing through his veins was enough to let him push through the pain that lanced through him.

He had to get out.

He had to go.

Tommy staggered over to the ladder on trembling legs, gripped the rungs with weak fingers, and began to pull himself up.

He was too weak.

He couldn't do this.

The stomping footsteps above him stopped. They were right over his head. There was a light knocking on the stone above him. It was too late.

Tommy's blood was ice in his veins.

There was a scraping groan as the slab of faux-stone was pulled to the side.

Tommy staggered back, raising a hand to shield himself from the blinding light that trickled through the hole.

No, no, no, no.

“Yeah, yeah, calm down. I’m going to go. Give me a second,” he heard a voice say. Technoblade’s voice.

No, no, no, no.

Tommy stared up in horror at the pair of boots he could see stomping around the entrance.

No, no, no, no.

Techno peered down, his red eyes narrowing to try and pierce through the dark.

The TNT was coming. The TNT was coming.

Techno spotted Tommy, and both of their eyes widened. Tommy took another stumbling step backward.

He was dead, he was dead, he was dead.

Tommy’s foot caught on a misshapen lump of the cave’s floor.

Why did the universe hate him this much?

Tommy threw his arms out as he began to topple over, the rock enough to overbalance him and send him crashing down.

“Tommy?” Techno said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Tommy’s head hit the ground with a sickening crack that echoed up to the man that stood above him.

Chapter End Notes

Guys Tommy's sick with coronavirus. Should've worn a mask smh.

ANOTHER CHAPTER, ANOTHER AMAZING PEICE OF [FANART](#) BY SUGARFUR!!

and then through other eyes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Techno's trip to the woodland mansion had, all things considered, been a resounding success. He had gotten two totems of undying, killed enough illagers to sate his bloodlust for a while, and done enough exploring to refresh his knowledge of the terrain—had to keep up his reputation as the Human GPS, after all.

The irony of Dream giving him the maps to the mansion wasn't lost on Techno, but he was trying to maintain a somewhat cordial relationship with the man, and rejecting down a gift like this was one surefire way to *not* do that. Even so, he still didn't understand why Dream had seen fit to give him the maps in the first place; he was many things, Techno knew, but charitable wasn't one of them. Asking questions, however, was something he had decided not to do. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth" was an idiom for a reason, after all.

On the topic of horses—Techno's one regret was the fact that he had left Carl at his cabin. He'd seriously considered bringing the horse on his journey but ultimately decided that the advantages of travelling by trident outweighed those of travelling by horse. His decision had been wrong. Sure, it had been quicker, but he had missed the company of another being. Sure, Techno liked being alone, and often struggled to deal with people for too long at a time, but the company of animals was different to that of people, and being lonely was very different to being alone.

Ah, well. No point moping about it now. He was nearly home. He'd see Carl again. Phil might be there, too. Techno allowed a small smile to flicker over his features at the thought of seeing them.

He walked until he'd reached the base of his house, then took a moment to gaze up at the cozy little cabin. Retirement, he had decided, was good for the soul. There was a lot to it, but the biggest part was that its serenity allowed the voices and the bloodlust that came with them to settle down and grow quieter, less consuming, easier to control. The voices were always louder in high-stress situations, which wasn't great with a lifestyle that included a fight every other day. But now, for once, they were quiet, a muted hum in the back of his mind rather than the deafening, overwhelming scream he knew they could become.

Techno rounded the side of his cabin and screeched to a halt, his good mood bursting like a balloon.

"Carl?" he whispered. He broke into a run, angling for the splintered remains of the fence that had held his horse—his *friend*—in. "CARL!" Techno shouted, desperately clinging to the hope that maybe the horse was just nearby. "CARL, WHERE ARE YOU?"

No response.

Techno grit his teeth and crouched by the shattered fence, picking up a particularly large piece. Any hope of the horse having just wandered off—because Techno was under no illusion that the fence could contain him if he really wanted out—was lost as he dusted off the snow that lay on it. Carl was nowhere in sight, and, if the build-up on snow was anything to go by, he had been gone for days. Someone had taken him.

The rage that rose at the thought of that, at the thought of someone stealing his horse also brought rise to the voices.

Tommy, they chanted, *Tommy, Tommy, Tommy*.

Tommy was behind this? Techno's hand lowered to his hip, clenching tightly around the hilt of his sword as he thought of all the ways he could repay a slight like this.

No, the voices were quick to correct. *No, no, no*.

Techno huffed out a breath and allowed his grip to relax. As soon as they were assured that Techno didn't think Tommy was responsible for taking Carl, the voices went back to chanting his brother's name. They were acting unusually tame, even with his heightened emotions, so Techno was able to shove them to the side. He wanted to focus on his horse problem before unpacking whatever the voices were going on about.

His horse problem which was solved a moment later as Carl pranced around the corner of the cabin. Techno froze, stunned, then was bowled over by a wave of relief.

He ran up to the horse and threw his arms around his neck, burying his head into his soft mane. Carl whickered softly, comfortingly, as though to soothe Techno's distress.

Techno heaved a deep breath before withdrawing. "Never do that again, Carl," he said, his voice thick with fading concern. "God, you had me so worried. What are you doing out here, anyway? Are you the one who broke through your fence?"

Carl flicked his ears and tossed his head, staring at Techno emphatically. Techno had, over the time they'd known each other, become quite adept at reading the horse's expressions. This time, he seemed to say, *"doesn't matter."*

Carl lowered his head and butted it against Techno's chest, pushing him towards the house. *"Go inside."*

Techno laughed gently, patting Carl's head. "If you insist, then. I'm rebuilding your fence as soon as I can, though. What if you'd gotten shot, hm? Where would I be without you, o' horse of wisdom?"

Carl snorted.

"Ok, yes, I know you can take care of yourself. But you can't blame a man for worrying."

Carl snorted again.

Techno got a distinct impression that he was missing something.

“Well, don’t go wandering off again,” Techno muttered as he walked over to his doorway. His foot caught on something buried under the snow.

Curiosity piqued, Techno paused and bent down. He carefully patted the snow until he found the item. He pulled it up. It was a flimsy stone sword.

The best way to describe the weapon would be... *sad*, Techno thought as he looked down at it. The handle wasn’t at all sanded and was covered in rough splinters of wood; the blade itself was chipped and cracked, and barely looked like it would survive a single hit; the strips of leather that bound the handle and blade together were so torn and frayed that it looked like it was about to fall apart.

As if to prove his point, one of the straps snapped. The blade fell to the ground, leaving Techno holding nothing but a depressing little handle. He dropped it with a sigh. Not a very intimidating find.

Even so, Techno raised his guard as he crept into his house. Though monsters could occasionally find and drop weapons like that, it was also possible that it was from another person. The only person Techno would even consider letting near his house was Phil, and it couldn’t have been him. For one, the man would never use such a useless weapon. He’d also never just leave it discarded in the snow like that. And if he were home, he would’ve come out to greet Techno by now.

Phil's absence was disappointing but hardly surprising. It would’ve been nice to see him, yes, but the man had his own things to do. His life didn’t revolve around Techno.

But even if Carl was safe and his original fears of his horse being stolen had been proven wrong, the signs still pointed towards some unknown party having, at the very least, passed by his house. Techno didn’t like that.

The first thing he was greeted with upon stepping into the foyer was the shattered remains of a bottle, the last dregs of the potion it had contained still sticking to the glass.

Techno made his way to the chests that lined the wall, taking note of all the obvious disturbances. Many of them were unlatched or half-open, and much of the dust that had settled over his past few days of absence had been disturbed. The first chest he pulled open was full of potions. As expected, there were potions missing. Strength and healing, to be exact. Even if it hadn’t been for the hole in the rows of bottles that lined the chest, there were also fingerprints implanted in the dust, far smaller than either his or Phil’s.

Potions were something Techno hadn’t used for a while, not since he’d retreated to the arctic. The sobriety had actually made a notable difference to his mind and to the intensity of the voices, which had been a surprise. He had heard talk of potions’ harmful side effects but had been convinced they were stories. A lie that gave the people that knew the truth and freely used potions the upper hand over those who believed it and abstained from them. That was, apparently, untrue.

Either way, the fact that someone had been rooting around his previously unused potions chest told him all he needed to know about the question that had been plaguing him. There

was, or at least had been, a thief in his house.

Maybe that's why Carl had been so insistent that he go inside.

Looking through the other chests revealed many other stolen valuables; resources, weapons, and armour. Nothing he'd miss too badly, but annoying all the same. Techno sighed as he pulled open the final chest. He paused when he realised what he was seeing.

All the missing items were heaped in a messy pile, right in its center.

Some thief this guy was.

Shrugging, because it wasn't like he was going to complain about *not* being robbed, Techno closed the lid and stood.

He wondered if the voices knew anything.

Now that he had actively cast his mind to them, he could once again hear their chant. *Tommy, Tommy, Tommy.*

Oh. Was Tommy one that had gone through his chests?

Yes, yes, yes. Down, down, down below.

Thanks, voices.

Technosupport.

Techno mined the stone that covered the entrance to his basement and climbed down the ladder. To his immense relief, his cow, Bob, and two jack-o'-lantern mobs were all unharmed.

If Techno were honest with himself, he missed Tommy. The time he had been spending with Phil and Wilbur—or, well, his ghost—had reminded him of the good times, the old days, before there were sides and wars. It reminded him of growing up in a farmhouse full of warmth, smiles, and laughs. It was childish, yes, but a small part of him couldn't help but long to return to those simpler times.

Shaking himself from the memories, Techno continued the search for his brother.

The voices had said below, and Tommy wasn't here, so Techno assumed they meant even deeper than the basement.

He stomped his feet as he walked around, listening for any hollow stone. Techno nodded to himself as he heard the echoing thud he'd been searching for. Dropping to his knees, he rapped against the floor experimentally and was once again rewarded by a reverberating knock.

He'd found it.

Detectiveblade, said the voices.

Techno traced the crack that, now he was looking for it, was obviously unnatural. He dug his fingers into it and pulled, and a slab of stone came up with a scraping groan.

Techno coughed as the pungent smell of vomit, rot, and other even less pleasant things wafted up from the pit he'd revealed. He nearly gagged, taking a few steps back, raising a hand to block his nose. Even then he could practically taste the vile stench. He shuddered as he paced around the lip of the tunnel's entrance. If the stink was this bad up here, he didn't want to even consider dropping down.

Down, down, down, said the voices, unrelenting.

“Yeah, yeah, calm down. I’m going to go. Just give me a second.”

He walked for a moment longer before coming to a stop. He lowered his hand from his nose, made an effort to only take shallow breaths, and peered into the darkness of the pit. His eyes watered from the nauseating smell.

Surely Tommy wasn’t down there. He couldn’t be down there.

Light reflected off terrified blue eyes. Techno’s own eyes widened.

The glimmer of light disappeared as the shadowed figure retreated further back into the cave.

“Tommy?” he whispered, dread and denial clawing at his throat. There was no way Tommy was living down there.

His only response was a sickening crack that echoed up the tunnel.

“Tommy!” the name came out as a shout this time, lined with concern, with fear.

This time, there was nothing but silence.

Chapter End Notes

Okay about Carl, because Techno's emotional reaction might feel a little OOC. This man was literally willing to give his life for this horse, yeah? He cares a *lot* about him. Also, sue me, I like Techno being soft for his pets.

I feel like I should say here (it’s January 16th while I’m writing this) that Dream giving Techno a map to a woodland mansion and then Techno getting totems from it — that happened in canon. It's been a month and in dream smp time a month is more than enough time for something to become irrelevant, so I dunno if all of you have seen the stream where that happened (linked [here](#)) but yeah, I’m not making that up! Dream and Techno's interaction on the mountain would've gone very differently in this AU though.

SUGARFUR DREW SOME MORE AWESOME [FANART](#) THIS CHAPTER!! IT'S
OF TECHNO BEFORE HE GOES INTO THE CABIN

we don't have many days

Chapter Notes

Much of the dialogue in the first part of this chapter is taken directly from the stream where Phil got put under house arrest. That's why it's a bit light-hearted, especially at the start.

Also! I decided to use Winnow as Phil's last name because I find that Minecraft as his last name breaks immersion for me bc of the fact that it started as a joke, and using his irl real name kind of blurs that line between character and CC. Also, Winnow means the blowing of the wind which is cool bc he's an avian hybrid. So yeah, Philza Winnow. Also in this AU, Ranboo being an enderman hybrid means that he can teleport without an epearl.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Far away, in a country that floated on a man-made lake, a lonely father sighed.

Phil hated spending more than a few days in L'Manberg at a time. His status as a hybrid was something he kept close to his chest, so whenever he was in the country he had to keep his wings hidden.

His logic behind keeping L'Manberg's citizens in the dark wasn't exactly sound. It wasn't as though he was the only hybrid here, and tucking away his wings for too long was uncomfortable and painful; cramping his muscles and leaving his feathers displaced and brittle. He had only been here for three days and was already starting to feel the ache in his back.

But avian hybrids had long lifespans, and Phil was old. He had lived through a time when hybrids were ostracised merely because they weren't full-blooded humans. A time when proclaimed 'hybrid hunting' was practically the norm, something no one gave a second thought to because those slain were hybrids, were lesser, were *animals*. A time when the feathers and wings of avians were sought-after commodities, valued for their beauty and rarity.

Things had changed since then. His habits had not.

He was drawn from his thoughts by the incessant ring of his doorbell.

"Phil! Phil, come out here!" came Tubbo's voice, muffled only slightly by the wood of his door.

"Yes, yes, hello!" Phil shouted back, standing and making his way across the room. The ringing continued. "Oh my god, you only need to press it once," he grumbled as he pulled

open the door. "I'm right here."

Phil blinked. Outside his door, wearing aprons slattered rather liberally with blood, stood Quackity, Tubbo, and Fundy. Behind them, looking rather a lot like he didn't want to be there, was Ranboo. He, at least, was wearing normal clothes.

"Hi, Phil!" Tubbo and Fundy said. Despite their apparent cheer, there was something off about their expressions, their body language.

"Hello," Phil said, hiding any misgivings behind a friendly smile. He waved a hand vaguely at their clothes. "What's with the getups?"

Tubbo looked down at his apron. "Uhh."

"They were cooking," supplied Ranboo.

The other three nodded quickly. "Yeah, we were cooking."

"Potatoes," said Tubbo.

"Red potatoes," said Ranboo.

The other three nodded again. "Yeah, we were cooking red potatoes."

Phil stared down at the little group. Ridiculous as they were acting, they were the country's officials, and could only be here to talk about something important. However, they seemed insistent on dancing around what they wanted; rather unsubtly, he might add. After a moment, he took a step back, deciding he would just humour them. "Why don't you come inside?"

The four instantly crowded into his house, forcing him to shuffle backwards to give them room to fit. Ranboo had to stoop to enter the too-short doorway.

"Philza. We have a simple request," said Quackity as Fundy snapped the door shut. There was a subtle shift in his tone that sent a prickle along Phil's spine. The fact that they had positioned themselves between him and the door did not escape his notice. "We're looking for Technoblade."

Phil's heart dropped. Quackity took a step forward. He was uncomfortably aware of how exposed he was without his armour. "I don't think you should ask why. I don't think you should ask any questions. Just know that we are looking for Technoblade."

Phil scoffed, pushing down the dread that threatened to bubble up his throat. "You don't think I should ask any questions?"

"Yes," said Quackity, his tone clipped. "As per the request of the president, you, as a citizen of L'Manberg, must comply. We demand that you tell us where Technoblade is."

Phil kept his gaze locked with Quackity's as he lowered a hand to the sword sheathed by his side. "As far as I'm aware," he said slowly, tersely, "you're not the president."

Quackity stared at him for a moment before a mocking grin spread across his face. He reached out a hand to grab Tubbo's shoulder and drag the boy towards him. "Well, if that's your only problem," he said, "then I'm sure you'd be able to hear it straight from his mouth."

Phil's eyes flickered to Tubbo as he spoke. "Phil," he said quietly, a little nervous. "I think it would be for the best if you just gave us Technoblade's location."

"You see?" Quackity said, shoving Tubbo away again. He took another step forward, holding his hands out in an almost patronising attempt to placate him. Phil's fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword. "Just tell us where he is. You're a citizen of L'Manberg, and we're trying to get justice for our country. You should care about this just as much as we do."

There was something dark that flickered across Quackity's expression as he mentioned 'justice' that only served to set off more warning bells off in Phil's mind.

"So Philza," Quackity continued. "Just tell us where Technoblade is."

Phil stared for a second before he exhaled heavily, letting his hand drop from his sword and pulling himself up. "I'm not going to tell you. I'm never going to tell you," he said, his voice cold. Any remnants of the visit's cordial facade evaporated as soon as the words left his mouth. "You want your revenge, but he's changed his ways. He's not the same person you met."

"That doesn't matter," Quackity spat, expression twisting, his voice suddenly sharp. "It doesn't change what he did to this country."

"Phil, please." Tubbo still sounded a little hopeful, like he thought there was a chance that Phil would side with them. "You saw the crater he left. He spawned withers where this house stands. He's the one who did that to us, who reduced us to this."

Phil coughed, unable to look Tubbo in the eye. "Yeah, I mean, water under a bridge and all."

Quackity took two long paces until he stood toe-to-toe with Phil. When he spoke, his voice was hard and dangerous. "It is not '*water under a bridge*,' Philza. The fucking war crimes Technoblade committed are not and will never be '*water under a bridge*.' Tell us where he is, *now*. This is not a request."

Phil scowled down at Quackity, pushing the man back with a harsh shove and drawing himself up to his full height. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by Fundy.

"Stay loyal," whispered the fox hybrid. Wilbur's son. He was staring at Phil with pleading eyes. "Do it for the country."

"Stay *loyal*, you say?" Phil said, staring at him disbelievingly. The audacity these people to come prancing into his house, order him to sell out his own son, and then tell him to do it *for the country*? "Where exactly do you think this 'loyalty' comes from, hmm? Let me tell you, Fundy; it comes from nowhere because it does not exist. This fucking country drove Wilbur to his death, exiled Tommy, and now you're here trying to hunt down Techno, too!" He almost stumbled over his words there, the pain of the memories just barely overshadowed by

his burning anger. "I have no loyalty to you or to it and am not going to rat my son out to a group like you. I'm his *father*, for god's sake."

Fundy's ears drooped. "And... I'm your grandson."

Phil pinned him with a scorching glare. Rage simmered beneath his skin. "And I don't *care*."

Fundy flinched.

"Well," Quackity said with a flippant shrug, not even acknowledging Phil and Fundy's exchange. He made a little flicking motion with his hand. "We tried."

Before Phil could think to react, there was a warp of displaced air as Ranboo teleported behind him and seized ahold of his wrists, pinning them to his back. Phil let out a shout and tried to twist around, to pull away, but Ranboo's grip held fast. "Sorry," muttered the enderman hybrid as he unbuckled the sword that hung from Phil's belt.

Phil longed to extend his wings then and there, to knock Ranboo back with the feathered limbs, grab the dagger sheathed at his calf and fight off the rest of the intruders. But that would reveal his hybrid status to L'Manberg, and even if he managed to incapacitate Ranboo he would still be outnumbered three to one. It wasn't something he could afford. His wings were an ace he couldn't yet play.

"If you're not going to help us, we're gonna have to do this the hard way." Quackity turned to Tubbo and Fundy. "Search his chests. We're sure to find something that will lead us to the *pig*."

Phil struggled against the grip Ranboo had on his wrists, seething and shouting and biting out curses as the people he'd almost considered his friends tore through his chests and barrels, looking for something to help them kill his son.

"Fuck you," he hissed as Fundy passed by him. He strained against Ranboo's hold. "You're no grandson of mine, you hear me? You're fucking dead to me!" Fundy didn't spare him a glance, but Phil could see the way his eyes glistened with tears.

Good, he thought viciously.

"Hey, Big Q," Tubbo said after minutes had ticked by, holding something up, voice dripping with glee. "Look what I found."

Phil's heart sunk. He knew what Tubbo was holding. "Shit," he whispered, panic clawing at his throat. Why had he not put it in his ender chest?

His eyes flickered desperately around the room. He needed to think of something, and fast. Techno was good, but even he would struggle to fight against an ambush like the one these people would set. If they managed to catch him while his guard was down it could end in him losing one or more of his lives. Phil couldn't let that happen.

He let out a sharp exhale as his gaze landed on the fireplace. It blazed warmly, flickering with the heat of the fire he had lit to stave off winter's chill.

He knew what he could do.

He abruptly stopped struggling and relaxed into Ranboo's hold. He felt the hybrid start in surprise as his job of restraining Phil was made a lot easier. Phil waited with bated breath as he watched Tubbo and Quackity crow over their victory.

"Oh Philza, Philza, Philza." Quackity turned to him, smugness written in every line of his face. "You've fucked up big this time, you know?"

"What did you find?" Fundy asked.

"Yeah," said Ranboo, leaning over Phil's shoulder to try and catch a glimpse of the compass in Tubbo's hand. "What is it?"

Tubbo grinned. "This," he said, holding the compass out for the room to see, "is a compass with the words *Techno's Compass* engraved onto it. I think we can all guess where it leads."

"Why were you carrying this around, hmm?" Quackity asked mockingly.

"Go fuck yourself," Phil snarled.

Quackity ignored the curse, straightening as his tone and posture took on a more serious air. "Philza," he began, "we will not forget that you weren't cooperative with us today. You obstructed this country's judicial system." He turned to the president. "Tubbo, I believe this counts as treason."

Tubbo's eyes widened, the hand holding the compass dropping down to his side. "I suppose... a punishment could be arranged," he admitted, suddenly sounding unsure.

Upon seeing Tubbo's hesitation, Quackity once again took charge of the situation. "Philza," he said. "You refused to help us. We told you we were willing to do it the easy way and you spat in our faces."

Phil glowered at Quackity. For a moment, he considered actually spitting in his face but decided that the petty satisfaction would be worth nothing.

"Ranboo," Quackity said, "tie him by the fireplace. We'll come back later with more suitable chains. Until further notice, you, Philza Winnow, are under house arrest for obstructing justice. You can't say we didn't try with you."

Phil ground his teeth together. A shouting match would get him nowhere.

Tubbo hung back as Quackity and Fundy turned and left.

Now was his chance.

Tubbo watched silently as Phil slunk over to the fireplace, his head bowed, needing no prompting from Ranboo. His compliance—unexpected but no less welcome—meant the hybrid felt comfortable enough to drop Phil's wrists as he pulled out a length of rope.

Tension coiled in Phil's muscles as Tubbo stepped closer.

“Look, Phil,” the boy said, his voice quiet and genuine. Phil’s stomach churned at the sincerity in his tone. “I really am sorry about—”

He was cut off with a yelp as Phil twisted sharply and leapt at him, tackling him to the ground. In one quick, fluid movement, Phil withdrew his dagger from its sheath at his calf, hoisted Tubbo up by the collar, and held the weapon to his throat. He had no plans to actually kill him, but this needed to be a convincing performance. Techno’s life may well depend on it.

He could feel Tubbo shaking in his arms, could almost hear his heart pounding against his ribs. “Wait, please, Phil,” the poor kid gasped. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to— please don’t—”

“Shut it,” Phil snapped as Quackity and Fundy burst back into the house, drawn by the commotion. He felt Tubbo flinch as he fell silent. He firmly shoved down the guilt that threatened to rise.

“Stay back,” Phil barked. He wished he could extend his wings, spread them out wide and flare up his feathers, to make himself more threatening. Even without them, though, he cut an imposing figure, and the L’Manbergian’s eyes were wide with shock and fear. None of them had expected such an act of defiance. “Ranboo,” Phil continued, “get in front of me.”

When the hybrid didn’t move instantly, Phil pressed his blade harder against Tubbo’s throat. Blood welled against the metal and began dribbling down the boy's neck, and he let out a little cry of pain. “Now,” he snarled.

He caught the tiny nod Quackity gave and relaxed minutely as Ranboo stepped into his field of view.

“Good,” he said. “Now,” he held out a hand. “Tubbo, give me the compass. Move slowly.”

Phil grit his teeth as Tubbo remained still, unwilling to give up the compass. He tightened his grip on the knife, digging it deeper into Tubbo's skin. “I *will* slit your fucking throat.”

“Do it,” Quackity bit out finally, his eyes full of murderous rage as he watched the scene unfold in front of him, helpless to intervene. “Do it, Tubbo.”

Tubbo swallowed heavily against the knife as he withdrew the compass from where he had stuffed it in his pocket. Phil watched, tense and ready for any unexpected moves, as Tubbo pressed it into his outstretched hand.

As soon as he held the compass, he dropped the dagger, shoved Tubbo into an unsuspecting Quackity, and used the resulting confusion to whip around and throw the compass into the blazing fireplace. It meant a lot, held far more sentimental value than the iron and redstone it was crafted from, but Techno’s life and wellbeing were far worth more.

If he had been any slower, his plan wouldn’t have paid off, because the moment he let go of it Ranboo tackled him to the ground; pinning his hands behind his back, pressing his face

harshly into the stone hearth. Despite the pain, Phil's expression was that of a victorious smile.

Even if they managed to recover the compass before it completely melted, the heat would've already destroyed the tracking enchantment imbued into it. They had no way of finding Techno now. Phil's job was done.

"You," said Quackity, his voice soft and dangerous, full of a cold promise, "are going to regret that."

He stepped forward until he stood over Phil, who glared up at him defiantly. "Go. Fuck. Yourself." Phil said, taking care to draw out each syllable.

Quackity didn't answer. He raised one of his boots and smashed it into Phil's temple.

The world went dark.

-o-O-o-

The next morning, when the puppetmaster heard of Philza's arrest, a slow grin spread across his masked face.

With one hand, he leafed through the pile of maps that lay on his table, each one of them leading to a different woodland mansion. With the other, he absentmindedly rolled a glowing orb back and forward, ignoring the cries of the ghost he had trapped inside.

"Four down, none to go," he whispered to himself. "Checkmate, TommyInnit."

Chapter End Notes

the reason there's the whole thing of phil 'tucking his wings away' is because when i originally wrote and posted this chapter it was with a completely human phil and when i decided i wanted to write him as a hybrid, i was too lazy to change the whole chapter to fit with it and so this was my solution o7

HERE'S [ANOTHER PIECE](#) BY SUGARFUR, A SHORT COMIC OF PHIL THROWING THE COMPASS INTO THE FIRE

desperate measures

Chapter Notes

Warning for graphic depictions of injuries, surgery, and amputation.

I'm telling you now that this is not a nice chapter. If you're someone who gets squeamish easily, then proceed with caution. The beginning and end of the really bad parts is marked with ▷ and ◁, and I'm putting a really brief summary in the end notes for anyone who does want to skip over it - you can use [ctrl+f] to find it.

(There's a lot of medical jargon that you might have to search up to understand.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Concern instantly overrode any part of Techno that cared about the putrid stink that wafted from the cave. The voices were a cacophony of panicked, confused screams. They had somehow known Tommy was here, but that obviously hadn't extended to the knowledge of his state. Techno withdrew a torch and leaped down the rough, rocky tunnel. Even though he braced for it, the impact of landing still jolted painfully up his legs. As suspected, the smell was even worse down here. But he didn't have time to worry about that.

He took a moment to steady himself before he rose to his feet and scanned the cave he was in.

Words that jumped to mind included tiny, filthy, and cold. There was nowhere Techno could stand that would let him extend both arms without at least one of them brushing against the rough walls. Walls which he would definitely not want to touch, as they were caked in muck and grime. The floor was also covered in a disgusting layer of... well, Techno would rather not think about what he was stepping in. He shuddered. After this, he was going to craft himself a brand new set of boots.

Worse than that, though, may have been how cold it was. Even through his heavy winter clothing, Techno could feel the bite of the icy chill that pervaded every inch of the cramped little cave.

Little stubs of torches were scattered around the floor, but a quick glance was enough to let Techno know that none of them were new. That meant that there had been no light down here for at least a few days.

The most worrying part of it all was, of course, the fact that the figure sprawled before him had been *living* here, for god knows how long. In the flickering light of his torch, it was difficult to tell what state Tommy was in, but this environment alone was enough to let Techno know that any healing process wouldn't be easy. Even someone at peak physical

condition wouldn't fare well in this cave, and Techno somehow doubted that 'peak physical condition' could be used to describe Tommy right now.

Look after him, said the voices. Look after Tommy. Technodoctor.

Techno glanced at Tommy, then at the ladder, then back at his brother. There was no way he'd be able to safely transport him up the ladder. So, as much as he hated to extend the time Tommy spent trapped in his horrible little hole of his, Techno had no choice but to pull out his pickaxe and begin mining.

After hewing a staircase in record time, Techno hurried back to Tommy's side. He knelt down and carefully slipped his arms under his brother's shoulders and knees.

The boy was worryingly light, all skin and bones and nothing else. His clothes, if the pitiful rags he wore could even be called that, hung loosely off his skeletal frame, and his skin burned with the unnatural heat of a fever, a stark contrast to the chill of his environment. Techno held him as gently as possible, as though he were made of glass and the slightest misstep could shatter him. With how frail he felt, Techno wasn't sure how much of an exaggeration that was.

Tommy had always been a gangly kid; tall and thin, with awkwardly long limbs, but that couldn't even compare to the deterioration Techno was seeing now. It only became more apparent as Techno crested the top of his staircase and Tommy was bathed in the warm light of the cabin.

His brother somehow managed to be in a worse state than Techno had imagined.

The skin of his face clung tightly to the skull beneath, giving him a gaunt, dead look. His skin was flushed a feverish red, which was contrasted by the worrying blue of his lips and fingertips. His filthy, sweat-soaked hair stuck to his forehead, and his breaths came in short, shallow gasps.

Pneumonia, Techno thought grimly, recognising the symptoms for what they were.

He gently lowered Tommy onto the table that stood in the centre of the room he'd climbed to, having no better surface to treat his wounds on, and turned to the cabinet in the corner of the room.

Phil had insisted, as they'd built and supplied the cabin, that Techno kept a supply of as much medical equipment as he could.

("Mate, you're gonna be living in a cabin in the middle of nowhere," Phil had said firmly as Techno argued that he would never need all the equipment the man was bringing him. "I'm not always going to be here to help you. If you get hurt, or someone else gets hurt out here, you need to be prepared.")

Techno had relented with a sigh.)

He couldn't help but be grateful for that as he opened a cabinet in the corner of the room to reveal shelves full of first aid kits and potions.

The first thing Techno took was a surgical mask, which he pulled over his mouth and nose, and a pair of sterile gloves. He then pulled out everything else he could possibly need and set it down next to Tommy. He picked up a fire poker and stuck it directly into the heart of his fireplace, then grabbed a towel and soaked it in water.

Turning back to Tommy's prone form, Techno used the wet cloth to begin wiping away at the muck that caked his skin and hair. It quickly became clear that there were two major wounds that needed to be treated. Possibly three, as Techno had very clearly heard Tommy's head crack against the rocky ground of the cave.

His head, his shoulder, and his foot.

Techno wished he could just unstopper a regen potion, shove it down his brother's throat, and be done with it. But potions didn't come without their dangers, and with Tommy in as weak of a state as he was, drinking almost any potion would be just as deadly as leaving his wounds untreated. Techno would have to manually heal him.

Thankfully, that was something he had experience in. Over the many wars and conflicts he had fought in, where potions would often be used up within a few days and any injuries sustained after that would need to be treated by hand, Techno had become rather adept at hasty, impromptu medical procedures.

Techno had treated wounds far worse than Tommy's, and with far less equipment too.

Walking back to the pile of equipment, Techno reached in and withdrew a bottle filled with a thick, silvery solution.

It was an anaesthetic of sorts, the most powerful that he knew of. It had its basis in the potion of the turtle master, using its resistance effect to dull the nerves of the drinker and its slowness effect to induce an unconscious state. But there had been adjustments made to its brewing specifically to make it safe to use on weak, injured people, because that's what it was for—patients who were too unstable to be simply healed via potions, who instead needed to be put under while they underwent a medical procedure.

He soaked a new cloth in the potion and placed it inside Tommy's mouth. Trying to force it down his throat would just trigger a gag reflex. Rather than wait for the potion's effect to take hold, Techno began to treat the least severe of Tommy's wounds—his head. He gently carded his fingers through Tommy's filthy hair, trying to find where his skull had impacted the ground.

The bump he found was rather small, but when Techno pulled his fingers back they were sticky with blood. He grabbed another fresh towel from the pile, saturated it in water, then began cleaning the hair around the wound. Once satisfied, he began bandaging Tommy's head, wrapping it tightly enough that the dressing alone would be enough to apply pressure.

Having treated the head wound, Techno removed the anaesthetic cloth from Tommy's mouth. Now that the boy had been put under, any obstructions in his mouth needed to be avoided. Techno turned to Tommy's right leg.

▷The first thing he did was cut away at the singed pants Tommy wore, splitting them a little above his knee. Had he not had more pressing matters to attend to, Techno might have wondered over the fact that his clothing was all blackened even past the dirt, as though he had been standing too close to an explosion. As it was, however, Techno's undivided attention was on treating his brother's wounds.

He turned his gaze to the foot itself. Its only covering was the piece of wool that was messily wrapped around it, but Techno could tell, even before seeing the thing, that it was going to be bad. He picked at the rough dressing until he found its end, then gingerly began to unwrap it. As he went, something small and dark fell to the table. Techno paused and leaned closer to it, then pulled away just as quickly, his stomach twisting uncomfortably. It was a single toe.

He kept going.

After what felt like hours, four more shrivelled, blackened toes became visible. He didn't stop unwrapping the wool. As more of the skin was exposed, Techno saw that all of it was just as dead. The severity of the frostbite meant it couldn't be healed using potions. Even though Tommy was in no state to ingest any potions, they could have still been applied to his wounds to stimulate his body's systems, speeding up the healing process and possibly allowing his foot to recover.

The tissue of Tommy's foot was long dead, though. There was nothing *for* potions to stimulate.

Techno grit his teeth but continued pulling at the wool. When he got to the sole of Tommy's foot, he found that the dressing was stuck to something, requiring more force to be removed. Instead of pulling harshly and possibly worsening the damage, he slowed down, tugging experimentally from different angles. The makeshift bandage held fast. Techno sighed and reached over for a pair of surgical scissors, beginning to carefully cut away at the wool, as close to skin as he dared.

As he went, he realised something that made his stomach turn. The bandage wasn't stuck to Tommy's foot. It was stuck *inside* it.

The foot's sole had a wide, gaping hole in it, as though chunks of the flesh and muscle there had been burnt away. The fluid that had leaked from the wound had soaked into the wool and made it stick to the tissues inside.

Techno felt sick. He had seen a lot of things in his time, so much so that he was barely phased by much of what he was doing now, but this brushed on even his comfort zone. There was no way this foot was going to be salvagable. As much as he hated it, he knew what he had to do now, and there was no point delaying it.

Techno's heart was heavy in his chest as he doused a cloth with antiseptic and used it to clean the area he would need to operate on. He turned and grabbed a tourniquet from his pile of

medical supplies, then tied it around Tommy's right calf, pulling it as tightly as he could manage. Next, he got one of his regen potions, unstoppered it, and poured its contents into a small bowl. He dropped a wad of bandages and a bundle of string into the pink liquid.

Techno picked up a sterile scalpel and moved to a position beside Tommy's foot. He allowed himself a moment's pause, clenching his eyes shut, sucking in a sharp breath through his teeth, steeling himself.

Then he opened his eyes. Then he set the blade against the skin of his patient's shin. Then he began cutting.

He sliced through skin, fat, and muscle until there was a complete incision that went right around the leg, down to the bone from all directions. The tight tourniquet assured minimal bleeding.

He would need to saw through the bone above where he had just cut, so there would be flesh for him to wrap around the bone's stump. Techno gritted his teeth, grabbed the flesh of his patient's shin, and began stripping the muscle from the bone; using his scalpel to cut through tendons, peeling the flesh away until a portion of the tibia, with a few little pieces of meat resolutely clinging to it, was revealed.

There was one last thing he needed for the amputation. If not for Phil's insistence that Techno completely stock his first-aid cabinet, he would never have had it.

Techno set his scalpel to the side and picked up a gigli saw.

The flexible but strong blade of the saw, paired with its serrated edge, gave it the ability to easily cut through bone. Techno lay the blade against Tommy's exposed tibia, pulled it taught, and began dragging it left to right, side to side, again and again, sawing until he had gone cleanly through the bone. He grimaced as he pulled back, gingerly picking up the severed foot and setting it to the side.

A low-pressure stream of blood dribbled from the stump of his patient's lower leg. Techno grabbed a needle and the string he had doused in regen potion. He deftly threaded the needle, pulled the loose flaps of muscle around the newly cut stump of bone, and began suturing the skin together. He stabbed the needle through his patient's skin, pushed it through flesh, then pulled it out the other side, repeating the process over and over until the skin was held firmly together by a neat row of stitches. He snipped and tied the thread, then picked up the potion-soaked bandages.

After all that, dressing the wound was an easy affair. Techno sat back heavily once he was done, assured in the knowledge that the regen potion he had doused the string and bandages in would help speed up the healing process.

As much as Techno wanted to give himself a respite after that grisly procedure, he knew that there was one more wound he needed to look after. He placed more sutures and bandages into the bowl of potion and turned to his patient's arm.

The inflamed area around his shoulder was an even brighter red than the rest of his flushed, feverish skin. Techno carefully removed the tattered sleeve of his patient's shirt and wrinkled his nose as the festering wound came into view. The skin around its edges was stained a purplish-red and was raised, seeming to stretch over something lodged in his shoulder. Techno grimaced as he prodded the wound gently, trying to get a feel for what exactly had happened. He felt something shift inside the shoulder.

There was a foreign body under his patient's skin, one that the flesh had managed to heal over. Techno wondered how long it must have been sitting there for it to heal like that.

Techno picked up the cloth he'd used to clean his patient's leg, poured more antiseptic over it, and spread it around the affected area. After he was satisfied that it was suitably sterilised, he picked up a new scalpel. He set the edge of the blade against the raised skin and made a clean incision, cutting right across the swollen area. Foul-smelling discharge spurted out of the shoulder as the raised skin quickly became a gaping wound, wide enough for Techno to see the foreign body.

Buried deep inside the muscle of his patient's arm was a dark arrowhead, edged with vicious, serrated barbs that were hooked onto the tissue. Techno knew that they would make pulling it out without causing further damage a difficult, finicky process. Except that he also knew, just from looking at it, that the infection had set in a while ago. The muscle the arrow was buried in was a brownish-white colour, and even though the wound was wide open, no blood leaked from its walls. It had undergone necrosis. The tissue was dead. This meant that Techno didn't need to worry about further damaging it.

He picked up a pair of surgical pliers and dug them into his patient's shoulder. He used them to grab the arrowhead and then, heedless of how the barbs tore through the muscle that was already dead, pulled it out with one harsh jerk.

Once that was done, he replaced the pliers with a scalpel. He needed to debride the wound, to remove the necrotic tissue so it could begin to heal.

Techno carefully excised the walls of the wound until it began to bleed; a sign that he'd reached living flesh. He placed the scalpel aside, turned, and picked up the poker from where he'd set it in the fire, right at the start of this all. Gritting his teeth, Techno reached forward and pressed the red-hot tip to the bleeding wound. The room filled with a loud sizzling and the smell of burning flesh as the wound was cauterised.

Wounds like couldn't be sutured because they needed to breathe, so Techno set the poker down and ignored the second ball of threat he'd put in the regen potion, instead going straight for the roll of bandages. He wrapped them tightly around his patient's shoulder and tied the dressing off with a simple but secure knot.◁

After Techno finished, he allowed his shoulders to slump and his arms to fall to his sides. He peeled off the gloves he wore, now coated in gore and pus, and dropped them with the rest of his soiled equipment. Now that he was done, the single-minded focus that had possessed him throughout the procedure was finally fading, leaving him with a bone-deep weariness.

Hours must have passed.

Techno's arms shook as he slid them under Tommy's prone form and carried him upstairs.

He lay him gently on his bed but refrained from putting any coverings on him. As much as Techno wanted to cocoon his brother in furs and blankets, comfort and warmth, Tommy still burned bright with fever. Extra layers would do him no good. Instead, Techno returned downstairs, filled a bowl to the brim with tepid water, and carried it back up to Tommy's bedside. He picked up a cloth, soaked it in the water, and then lay it across his brother's flushed forehead.

And then, finally, he allowed himself to sit back with an exhausted groan. He had done all he could to help Tommy's recovery, but there was still so much wrong with his brother. As much as Techno hated to admit it, from here it was out of his control. He could help keep him comfortable in his feverish state, change his dressings every day, ensure that he kept hydrated and clean, but ultimately Tommy's survival was in his own hands now.

You did well, whispered the voices, comforting and soft. They had remained quiet throughout the procedure, strangely understanding of the fact that Techno couldn't afford to be distracted as he treated Tommy's wounds. Now they were back, murmuring reassurances in gentle tones that were so unlike them.

Techno smiled bitterly.

Maybe that was true. Maybe the voices were right.

He still hated himself for not being able to do more.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, hey guys, you know how in the streams Tommy has a foot he's trying to sell—
WE GOT SOME AWESOME [FANART](#) BY SUGARFUR OF TOMMY'S FOOT
GETTING DELETED (it's not graphic—it's more like just before the amputation
actually starts)

SUMMARY:

Techno jumps into the cave and brings Tommy into the cabin

He recognises that Tommy has the symptoms on pneumonia

He notices that Tommy's foot and shoulder are the areas that are both horribly wounded
and that he's gonna have to treat them specifically

(The warning starts here)

He treats the frostbitten right foot first. He amputates it below the knee

He then pulls the arrow out of Tommy's shoulder - which is very badly infected -
debrides and cauterises the wound, and then dresses it

(The warning ends here)

He brings Tommy upstairs and lays a wet cloth on his forehead to help treat Tommy's
fever

and time drifts by

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Days passed.

Tommy remained unconscious.

Techno spent each day sitting by Tommy's bedside, doing nothing but keep a hawk-like watch on his brother's comatose form. Techno had maneuvered him into the recovery position, to stop him from choking on his tongue, or spit, or vomit, and to help keep his airway clear each time fell into a fit of hacking coughs.

The only times he left were, during the first day, when he'd gone to find a pair of clothes to change Tommy into, and for breaks to grab himself food and water, though he always returned upstairs before he actually started eating.

The only thing he did as the hours passed were the methodical acts of placing an ice chip in Tommy's mouth, keeping an eye out for when it melted, and then replacing it with another—one of the few safe ways to keep him hydrated; of, every half hour, replacing the wet cloth on Tommy's forehead with a new one; and of, every morning, listening to Tommy's breathing for any hint that his pneumonia may have gotten any worse, wiping down his skin in an effort to keep him at least *somewhat* clean, and redressing the wounds on his shoulder and the stump of his leg.

It was all Techno could do.

It was all Techno could do, and he *hated* it.

He hated the feeling of uselessness that came with how little his actions seemed to do. He hated the fact that, despite his best efforts, Tommy's state only seemed to be worsening. He hated the fact that he had to *watch* as Tommy withered away before him, while he, without any way of giving Tommy the nutrition he so desperately needed, was helpless to stop it.

He hated the fact that Phil *still hadn't come home*.

After they'd built the cabin together, Techno and Phil had poured time and effort into setting up a complex system of redstone and enchantments that allowed them to send long-distance messages to each other. It had been difficult, and it was only able to communicate in very small messages, but it was beyond helpful for both of them.

The day he'd returned home and found Tommy unconscious under his base, after finishing treating his brother's immediate wounds, Techno had sent a message to Phil, urgently requesting that he come back to the cabin.

Phil always responded.

Phil hadn't responded.

Techno wished he could just force-feed Tommy a regen potion and that it would make everything better. But in his current state the chance he'd survive it was slim.

It wasn't the wounds that stopped Techno from using potions. If being wounded meant that regen potions were too dangerous to be used, then regen potions would be rendered rather useless. It also wasn't the wounds that needed a magical boost to heal. They were healing quite nicely; the infection in his shoulder fading quickly, the healing of both wounds sped up by the potion he continued to soak their dressings in.

He needed a potion to help Tommy recover from the pneumonia Techno could still hear rattling in his lungs, and it was his malnourishment that stopped him; Tommy's lack of nutrition and energy. Because while applying potions to the skin was safe enough to do in his state, consuming them definitely wasn't.

There were four very distinct things that potions needed in order for their magic to work effectively.

Power, magic, effect, and soul.

The power came from the blaze powder used in the brewing of all potions. The burning energy of blazes was contained within their rods, and the potions that were created using the crushed-up powder were infused with that same blazing, raw energy. It was this that gave potions the ability to be used as potions and not simply existing as magic items. It also, however, came with harmful effects that could take hold when potions were overused or drunk by people too weak to process them.

The magic and effect of potions came from what was used to brew them. The magic, with a few exceptions, had one source; nether warts. When mixed with the magic of the hell-born fungus, even the most mundane of ingredients could be brewed into powerful potions. Conversely, the effect could come from a vast array of sources and varied hugely from ingredient to ingredient. Sugar, for example, due to the energy contained within it, created potions of swiftness. Magma cream, due to the nature of the creature it came from, created potions of fire resistance.

The soul component came from the consumer themselves. When potions were used, the power of the blaze was what spread the magic throughout the drinker's system and allowed the effect to take hold. It was also, however, a toxin; something that could wreak much harm if left unchecked in a person's body. Usually, the consumer's own energy, the 'soul,' was what flushed that toxin from their body in an expulsion process that also gave potions their time-limited effects. While there were certain ingredients that could nullify this potential for harm, making it safe for those potions to be administered to patients who would otherwise be too weak to flush the fiery magic out, it was a property shared by few potion-brewing ingredients.

The problem came when potions with these potentially adverse effects were used by people who lacked the energy to flush the power from their system. Techno had seen it before;

injured soldiers on battlefields drinking potions without realising they were too weak for it to be safe. It was a slow death, one of boiling blood, burning skin, and a lot of screaming.

Human bodies weren't built to contain the firey magic of blazes, and so giving Tommy potions in his current state would be... inadvisable.

Which was another thing Techno hated.

He should make a list.

With each day that passed, Techno's concern, which had started as a little bubble in his chest, expanded and grew until it began to choke him. Tommy wasn't getting better, Phil was missing, and Wilbur... well, he had no idea what his brother's ghost was doing.

And there was still nothing he could do but sit. and. wait.

Techno had, numerous times, taken the time to wonder over what Tommy had been doing at his house in the first place. Why, out of everywhere he could have gone, he had come *here*. Because, while Techno had sworn off violence, was trying to change his ways, Tommy had no way of knowing that. The last time they'd interacted, after all, had been when Techno had summoned a pair of withers to destroy his country.

That can't have left a good impression.

When Phil had told him that of Tommy's exile, Techno had wanted to go after his brother himself. Theseus, his speech, the parallels he had drawn—they had repeated themselves. He had warned Tommy, warned L'Manberg, but it had been pointless. History had rhymed, as it always did. And as much as Techno had wanted to help Tommy in his exile, perhaps even bring him back to the cabin, he had never been able to get the information he needed to find him. Phil, his informant into the affairs of L'Manberg, wasn't privy to Tommy's location, and so neither was Techno.

But now, his brother had found him. Now, Techno could protect him. And, as soon as Tommy woke—and he would wake, he *would*—Techno would find out who had put his brother in this state, and they would pay.

The voices cheered at the prospect.

On the third day of Tommy's coma, as phantoms began circling his cabin, their hisses and shrieks echoing through the walls, Techno decided to begin something productive to both busy his idle hands and to stave off the dread that rose with each day that Tommy's condition failed to improve. He was by no means a prosthetist, and woodwork was something he was, at the very best, mediocre at, but he needed *something* to do with his hands and mind as he sat by Tommy's bedside.

Once his brother woke up, he would need a prosthetic.

Techno knew that anything he created now would ultimately be a temporary fit, replaced later when he had the time and resources to craft something intricate and suitable for long-term

use. Maybe he'd even be able to get Phil's help, once he found him. His father had always been good at designing machines and contraptions.

But whittling away at logs of wood, trying to find a way to shape them so that they could function as a prosthetic, gave Techno something to do, filled the sleepless nights he spent sitting by Tommy. That, in addition to the murmuring voices in his head, were the only things that kept him sane.

He was, of course, no less attentive to Tommy's condition, and would often set aside his project to perform one of the actions needed to keep his brother as healthy and comfortable as he could. But it certainly did make the time pass quicker.

Once four days had passed and Techno still hadn't allowed himself a moment's rest, the voices' worry turned to him.

You need rest, they whispered. Sleep, sleep, Technosleep.

Techno pushed them aside, dismissed their concern with a wave and a grunt, but he knew they were right. He couldn't care for Tommy if he couldn't keep his own eyes open.

He could feel his eyelids drooping more with every hour that passed and could tell that his thoughts were slowing and becoming less and less coherent. As a precaution, in case he did fall asleep and something happened to Tommy while he was resting, Techno pressed a small treasure into his brother's hand and wrapped his lax fingers tightly around it.

It was one of Techno's most valuable items, something he'd acquired only days prior. The magic it contained was vile and taboo, and if used too often could have disastrous consequences to the user and their state of mind. And, as much as he hated the idea of such dangerous magic being used on his brother, it was something that could fade. A final death wasn't.

And Techno would do anything to keep his family alive.

It was on the fifth day that Techno's head finally dropped to his chest, the wood he'd been carving falling to the floor as he finally fell asleep.

It was also on the fifth day that Tommy finally awoke.

Chapter End Notes

Me, writing this chapter while watching Techno's stream:

Techno: family!sbi isn't real

Me, tears in my eyes, hugging the fic to my chest: t- take that back

WE GOT SOME EPIC [FANART](#) BY SUGARFUR, OF TECHNO SITTING BY TOMMY'S BEDSIDE

terror unravelling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

To Tommy, waking was like wading through a pool of viscous, warm water. He felt weighed down, his limbs heavy, his mind fuzzy with the remnants of sleep. Waking was also, however, a rather pleasant surprise, as it hadn't been something Tommy had expected to do again.

The surface below him was soft and squishy, a sharp contrast to the hard, rocky ground he could just barely remember lying on for days before. Tommy groaned softly and rolled onto his side, and the distinct lack of pain shooting through his shoulder was another unexpected but no less welcome surprise.

It was just a good day to be TommyInnit, he supposed.

Not that everything was well. He felt hot, too hot, and his entire body was covered in a sheen of sticky sweat. His throat was sandpaper, his head pounded with a sharp, unrelenting ache, and his chest burned with a deep-seated pain. Each time he breathed too deeply it rattled in his lungs, feeling like a knife tearing through his ribs.

Maybe it wasn't such a good day to be TommyInnit, he amended. But still better than the state he'd been in before.

Tommy's eyelids were leaden and gummy, and pulling them open was quite the process. When he finally managed to blink, it took a few moments before the world properly came into focus. He glanced around the room he was in, all planked wooden walls and cozy woolen rugs, lit by the warm glow of the fire in its corner and the slivers of sunlight that peeked through shuttered windows.

And then Tommy's gaze landed on was Technoblade, seated by his bedside, his head dropped down against his chest.

Any semblance of rational thought fled his mind in an instant.

Tommy's eyes were wild as he lurched upright, keeping his gaze locked solely on his brother. Panic sunk its hooks deep into him, dragging him down to a state where all he felt was a raw, visceral fear that urged him to *run*.

Something small and golden fell out of Tommy's hand and clattered onto the floor as he scrambled up and out of the bed. He didn't care.

He swung his legs over the side of the mattress, staggered to his feet, and only just managed to stifle a cry as something went wrong and he was sent crashing to the hard wooden ground. Tommy lay there, gasping for breath, keeping his wide, terrified eyes trained on Techno. He

couldn't stop. He needed to run and hide, to get far, far away from this house before his brother woke.

Tommy grit his teeth, set his hands firmly against the ground, and pushed himself to his knees with trembling arms. His shoulder twinged uncomfortably.

He raised his knee and set his left leg against the ground, then rose to his other foot.

Once again, Tommy fell to the ground.

This time, he realised why.

His breaths came out in choked, hiccuping sobs as he stared in horror down at the stump of his right calf. Tommy scrambled across the floor until his back slammed against the wall and he couldn't move any further, as though the distance would somehow let him get away from his own amputated limb.

No, no, what the fuck, this can't be real. This cannot be real.

Reaching out unthinkingly, Tommy began to tear at the dressing around his leg, ripping at the bandages until the scarred flesh of his calf was exposed. His stomach churned.

Trembling fingers prodded at the rough scar. It felt strange and weird and *wrong* on so many levels. Without conscious thought, Tommy's fingers started digging into the flesh, heedless of the way his jagged nails pierced through the skin and sent warm, sticky blood dripping from the crescent-shaped cuts. Maybe the pain would wake him from this nightmare.

Tommy's head snapped up at the sound of a quiet snort. His face paled as he saw Techno shifting in his sleep.

He was waking up.

His horror was washed aside as the all-encompassing urge to flee consumed him again, almost enough to make him forget about the leg entirely. He had no time for this, for *anything*, because all he needed to worry about was *getting away*. He pushed himself to his knees and began dragging himself across the floor, each desperate, gasping breath sending agony shooting through his chest.

He reached the ladder shaft in the corner of the room and started down at Techno's storage room. He could use the resources down there, the potions, weapons, and armour, to fight Techno off. But first, he'd need to get down. Had he spared another moment to look, he might have noticed the crudely fashioned staircase that led down to the storage room. But he was so blinded by his panic that, to him, the only way down was via ladder.

Tommy glanced back to see that Techno was truly stirring now. He couldn't wait. He couldn't take this slowly. He had to go.

Tommy set his left foot against one of the rungs and gripped the ladder tightly. He hopped down one bar, moved his hands down, and then repeated the process. His arms, weak from malnourishment and disuse, shook as they held his body weight, and by the time he reached

ground level, he was gasping for breath and wincing as each sharp inhale sent a jagged spike of pain through his chest.

Tommy clung tightly to the ladder as he set his left foot against the floor, struggling to keep his balance and panicking because he couldn't let himself slow down, he had to *go*, he had to *run*, he had to *move*. Tommy cried out again as he was unable to keep his balance and he was sent crashing back to his knees. The ground here was made of stone rather than wood and was far less forgiving as it scraped against his skin, leaving it raw, stinging and bleeding.

Tommy couldn't afford to care.

He tried to hold his breath as he strained to listen for any noise from upstairs. That shout had been too loud, far too loud. Techno was going to wake up and see him missing and hunt him down and—

“Tommy?”

The voice was quiet and slurred by sleep, but to Tommy it was like a suffocating tidal wave. His heart was throwing itself against his ribs, as though trying to tear its way out of his skin. Each of his shallow, gasping breaths sent a new wave of agony rattling through his chest. His entire body was clammy and shaking as it screamed at him to do the only thing he could think of; his only option, now that he could no longer flee. Arm himself and fight.

Tommy struggled to crawl across the stone bricks, towards the chests that lined the wall, ignoring the way the rough ground tore at his knees. Techno repeated his name, this time in a shout.

Tommy fumbled to unlatch one of the chests, the one that contained potions, his adrenaline making it take far longer than it should have. He reached in and grabbed a bottle containing a shimmering grey potion, labeled invisibility, before scrambling back into the corner of the room.

When he drank the potion, instead of feeling its usual, comforting warmth of washing through his system, Tommy's body *burned*. The invisibility effect that prickled over his skin, hiding him from prying eyes, was accompanied by a flaming heat that blazed through his veins, stealing the breath from his lungs and making his heart stutter in his chest.

The potion bottle slipped from numb fingers.

He felt, somehow, even worse than he had before.

But the invisibility came into use as, not a second later, Techno leaped down from the floor above. “Tommy!” he shouted again, red eyes darting around the apparently empty storage room.

If Tommy had any sort of lucidity, he would have realised the edge he heard in Techno's voice as that of panic. He would've recognised the spark in Techno's wide eyes as one of worry. As he was now, all Tommy saw was a hunter, a fighter, the violent warrior who had executed his best friend, summoned withers over his nation, and wanted him dead.

He clamped a trembling hand over his mouth and nose in an attempt to mask his ragged, gasping breaths. Tears of terror leaked from his eyes as Techno's gaze landed on the streak of blood that had come from his scraped knees.

Tommy cringed back into the wall, drawing his legs to his chest and trying to hold his breath. He was fucked. He was so, so fucked. He was going to be found and killed and that would be his last life gone. Why had he taken residence in Techno's house in the first place? Why had he thought it would be a good idea? Ever since they were young, Techno had been violent, driven by a craving for blood and conflict. Tommy knew this, and yet he'd still dared to invade his home, to squat in his basement, to steal his items.

Freezing would likely have been a kinder death than whatever Techno would do to him.

Techno's gaze followed the bloody trail until they came to a stop at the empty potion bottle. It flickered along the rest of the blood, finding its abrupt halt in the room's corner. He was looking directly at the spot where Tommy was huddled. There was no question about whether he knew he was there. Though he couldn't see it, Tommy was staring back up at him, eyes wide and terrified.

"You didn't," Techno said, his voice coming out as little more than a horrified whisper. Then, abruptly, he pulled out a pickaxe and mined through the ground underneath him.

Tommy blinked as Techno dropped into the basement he knew was nestled below the house.

He didn't know what Techno was playing at, but he could use this momentary lull to his advantage. Mustering the tiny sliver of energy he had left, Tommy dragged himself back over to the chests and pulled open the one he had previously deposited the stolen valuables into.

All he was able to pull out before Techno climbed back out of the basement was an enchanted diamond sword.

Tommy turned back to Techno, holding the sword defensively with shaking arms. There was no point in trying to preserve the illusion of being invisible, as Techno already knew he was in the room and any time he moved he left a streak of blood leading directly to himself.

Hiding was out of the window. His only other chance of survival would include somehow getting past his brother, escaping into the snowy wasteland beyond, and then managing to not die long enough to find another shelter. He wouldn't even be able to get past the first step. Even in peak shape, Tommy would never be able to get past Techno. Techno, the ruthless warrior, the renowned fighter, the feared Blood God, who had slain thousands and instilled terror in the hearts of thousands more. Techno, who was wearing nothing but light indoor clothing hidden beneath a warm winter cloak. Techno, who was holding... a bucket of milk?

Tommy swallowed heavily as his brother, heedless of the sword leveled at him, began approaching. Understandably so, as the weapon—trembling sharply, point tipped downwards, barely suspended above the ground—really didn't cut a very imposing sight.

"S-stay back," Tommy warned, his voice shaking and hoarse with disuse.

It was another thing his brother ignored.

When Techno got within striking distance, Tommy raised the sword and began to swing it down in a slow, weak arc—

And cried out in fear as his wrist was grabbed in a crushing hold and twisted to the side, enough that he was forced to drop the sword from numb fingers but not to do any real damage. Techno dropped his arm and kicked the sword aside, sending it skittering across the floor, out of reach. The fact that, even invisible, Techno still managed to know exactly where Tommy's arm was, was a sharp reminder of just how outmatched he was.

Tommy stared up at the man standing over him, petrified, his blood boiling in his veins, his stomach swirling with so much terror he felt sick. There was only one other thing he could think to do. It was something that had stopped Dream from killing him, if only just, though he didn't imagine it would be very effective on Techno.

He began begging for mercy.

Words tumbled from Tommy's mouth in an unrelenting tide. His voice was choked with tears and fear and disuse, and each word seemed to grate against his raw throat, but he pushed on. "Please, Techno, d-don't kill me. I-I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I never should have taken your stuff. I-I'm sorry. I-I know you hate me, but please, please just let me go. I'll never come back. Y-you won't ever see me again. You can take away all my things before I go. But please, I'm on my last life, I-let me—"

Tommy cut himself off with a gasp as Techno dropped to a knee before him. He clenched his eyes shut tightly, tipping his head away from the man in front of him. He had known that begging wouldn't work.

Techno held out the bucket of milk. "Drink," he said sharply.

Though Techno couldn't see it, Tommy had squinted one eye open and was staring at the bucket, frozen, confusion and shock painted across his features.

"I swear to god, Tommy, drink the damn milk or you are going to die."

Tommy, misunderstanding the words' intent, flinched back into the wall. He reached out shakily with a pair of invisible hands, grabbed the bucket, took a few gulps of the still-warm milk, and then broke into a fit of hacking coughs that pulled at his lungs and left him gasping for breath.

As the invisibility faded, so too did the blazing fire that had been eating away at Tommy's chest since he'd drunk the potion. He could still feel the heat, the burning, but the milk had managed to take off its edge.

Techno let out a sigh of relief as Tommy shimmered back into visibility. "Tommy," he breathed out, beginning to reach out a hand but pausing as Tommy flinched away. His next words weren't directed at Tommy's physical state. "What happened to you?"

“I’m s-sorry,” Tommy whispered brokenly. He began pushing himself up against the wall. “I-I’m so sorry. I-I’ll get out, now.”

“Tommy,” Techno said sternly, resting a hand on his shoulder to keep him from standing. Tommy stiffened under the touch. “You’re not going anywhere. You don’t *need* to go anywhere. I’m not going to throw you out. I’m not— I’m not going to *kill* you.”

Tommy stared up at him disbelievingly. “R-really?”

“I promise,” Techno said. “Brother’s honour.” He reached out his arms again, slower this time, ready to stop instantly if Tommy reacted badly. “Now c’m on, we need to get you back upstairs. I’m sure you’ve done more damage to yourself I’ll need to fix.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Tommy said, almost petulant, then hissed as the words caught on something in his throat and sent pain rippling through his still-burning chest.

Techno leveled a deadpan stare at him as he slipped his arms under the teen’s legs and shoulders. “Sure you didn’t.”

Tommy sucked in another sharp breath as Techno lifted him from the ground.

“Sorry,” Techno muttered as he made his way over to the staircase he had hewn days before. He moved slowly as he climbed the rough stairs, making sure not to jostle his injured brother.

By the time he reached the top, Tommy had slumped bonelessly into Techno’s arms, his frantic, adrenaline-fuelled energy all but gone as he allowed himself to calm. His entire body ached something fierce, new pains making themselves known each minute that the tension continued to bleed away from his system. The boy groaned as Techno carefully laid him back onto the bed.

“Am I going to be okay?” he whispered, something scared and plaintive in his tone, his eyes half-lidded as unconsciousness began dragging him back down.

A gentle hand carded through his hair. “Yes, you are,” Techno said softly. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Chapter End Notes

i decided on a whim to make a [discord server](#)! feel free to join if you wanna talk more to me or other likeminded mcyt fans!!

WE GOT A [SECOND](#) BY KURO, OF TOMMY MISINTERPRETING TECHNO’S WORDS AND SEEING DREAM INSTEAD OF HIM!!

[ANOTHER](#) BY SUGARFUR, OF TOMMY DRINKING THE POTION!!

a point of decline

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil woke sharply as he was doused in a bucket of cold water.

He spluttered gracelessly, eyes snapping open, jerking up from where he had been slumped over in a metal chair he had no memory of falling asleep in. His head pounded with an unrelenting ache, like something was trying to claw its way out of his skull. He tried to reach up to massage at his temples, but his arms were stopped by the heavy manacles that were clamped around his wrists, pinning his hands behind the back of the chair. A chain hung between the two shackles, holding them, and Phil's wrists, together.

Phil's mouth went dry. He tried to swallow but found his throat was clogged up by the dread that bubbled in his chest.

He looked up.

Before him stood Quackity, holding an empty bucket, a shit-eating grin plastered over his face. Flanking him was Tubbo, who was wringing his hands anxiously, his shoulders hunched over, his gaze flickering skittishly around the room. A little further back stood Fundy, his ears pressed flat against his head, his mouth set in a tight line as he met Phil's eyes. Ranboo hovered in the shadows at the room's edge, his heterochromatic eyes gleaming in the dark, full of what might have been pity. They were all armourless, as per L'Manberg's laws, but that did little to stop Phil's heart from sinking to somewhere around his knees.

“Philza! It's great to have you back with us.” Quackity set the bucket down and took a step back, nodding to Tubbo, who stood right next to him. “Tubbo, if you will.”

The boy stepped forward and cleared his throat. He glanced over at Quackity, who raised an expectant eyebrow, lip curling into a barely-noticeable sneer. Tubbo swallowed nervously and turned back to Phil. The interaction, while short and barely noticeable, set Phil's teeth on edge.

When Tubbo spoke his voice stilted, as though he were reciting the words of a script. “You, Philza Winnow, are under arrest. After obstructing justice by refusing to divulge the location of a known fugitive, you were put under house arrest. To which you responded by fighting back, assaulting me, the president, and threatening my life to allow you to continue to harbour said fugitive.”

Phil squinted. “I'm not hearing any mention of a trial?”

Tubbo opened his mouth to speak but was waved off by Quackity. “Oh, you're not getting one. Tubbo's the president, after all. He can do what he likes.”

The dismissiveness with which they treated the law, made Phil's stomach churn uncomfortably. He had known of this side of L'Manberg, of course—what with Schlatt's dictatorship, Tubbo's execution, and Tommy's exile. Their legal system was incredibly backwards—no rules, no real procedure holding back the people in power from doing whatever they wanted. They could kill, banish, and imprison people on a whim, and there was nothing, no one, that could stop them.

There was a difference between knowing something like that and being on its receiving end.

Phil glared up at Quackity through his sopping wet hair, allowing none of his misgivings to shine through. "So why am I not already in a cell?"

"Ah, we'll get to that. But first," Quackity turned and beckoned Ranboo over. The enderman hybrid stepped forward, holding a pair of some sort of metal clamps that Phil hadn't previously noticed. Thick chains hung from both of them, almost dragging along the ground. Quackity smirked at Phil. "Extend your wings."

Phil's breath hitched. He stared at Quackity for a long moment, his eyes wide, before he regained enough of his composure to utter an unconvincing, "My what?"

"Your wings, Philza. Yes, we know about them. Don't make this hard for yourself."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Phil said tersely. Thoughts were spinning through his head so quickly they nearly made him dizzy. How did Quackity know? How did he know that Phil had wings, that he was a hybrid? It was a fact that he kept under tight, tight wraps. He could count the number of people he had told on one hand, three of whom were his sons, one of whom was dead.

But Quackity, and by extension, the group standing around him, knew.

How did they know?

"I *said* not to make this hard for yourself," Quackity said softly, dangerously, pinning Phil beneath a cold, knowing gaze. "Playing dumb won't end well for you. We've gone the hard way before, and we'd be more than happy to do it again."

Phil exhaled sharply, trying to quash the panic that wormed around his chest. Quackity was trying to get under his skin, to scare him, to sew seeds of fear and push them to grow. He couldn't let it get to him. "Fine," he said. "Fucking— how do you know about them?"

"The person who told us of your connection to Technoblade knew quite a lot more than just that," Quackity said, stepping forward. He nodded back to Ranboo and the clamps he held. "He also supplied us with these."

There was a small part of Phil that wanted to puzzle over the identity of their informant. It was near-instantly drowned out by the horror that flooded his system as the purpose of the clamps dawned on him. The pit of dread sitting heavy in his heart began spreading uncontrollably through his chest, eating away at his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. His

skin felt clammy and hot and sick, and he was suddenly all too aware of the weight pressed against his back, his wings that weren't physically present but were there all the same.

An avian hybrid's wings were the very heart of their existence, the source of their hybrid power. Flying was a vital part of their livelihoods, and their wings were what allowed them to partake in it. Tucking his wings away felt awful enough, but had become a habit of his decades ago, when there had been bounties on the wings and feathers of avian hybrids and the lands had been crawling with those who would have hunted him without a second thought. Hiding them away had been a necessity then, though circumstances had become vastly safer since then.

To have his wings externally restrained, however, was something entirely different. Disgusting and shameful. The very thought of it felt repulsive in a way that was primal and instinctive, had bile rising in Phil's throat and horror clawing at his chest. He would rather pull out his own fingernails than have those clamps set over his wings. He would be willing to bet that they were enchanted, too. Engraved with runes and imbued with magic that would lock away his enhanced strength, speed, and senses; power that he could take advantage of when his wings were extended but that sat passively within him when they were tucked away.

Phil swallowed heavily, eyes flickering over Quackity and then Tubbo, Fundy, and Ranboo who hovered over his shoulder. He wanted nothing more than to fight his way out of this, but he was restrained, outnumbered, and outgeared. The only thing an escape attempt would get him was injuries and harsher treatment. So Phil grit his teeth, stomped down on his terror, and prepared to extend his wings.

Quackity pulled out a sword. Phil froze, the blood draining from his face, his eyes wide as he stared at the netherite blade. "You know," he said, trying to keep his voice from wobbling, "I think I'd rather you put that away first."

"Don't worry," Quackity said. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes that did little to alleviate Phil's fear. "This is just insurance, for if you try anything. So, y'know, *don't*."

A breath hissed through Phil's teeth. He didn't want to go down passively. He wanted to shout, to scream, to rage at the unfairness of the situation he was trapped in. He wanted to wipe that smug, satisfied expression off Quackity's face. He could none of those.

Phil kept his gaze locked on the ground and untucked his wings slowly, carefully, not moving the limbs too quickly in case Quackity got a little too stab-happy with his sword. Phil's pulse quickened as the power that came with his extended wings washed over him, invigorating him and filling him with the urge to resist, to fight and escape.

He couldn't. He *couldn't*.

His wings shook as he spread them, the cramped muscles screeching in protest as they were finally stretched. He glanced back and winced at his feathers' sorry state; dull and bent and with more than a few broken shafts. They were in desperate need of a preen and a wash, something he likely wouldn't be able to give them for a long time.

“Fold them,” Quackity ordered.

Phil glowered at him. “Give me a moment,” he ground out, trying to savour the time he had with his wings extended and unbound.

Quackity raised the sword. “*Fold them.*”

Phil scowled and did as he was told. “Fuck you,” he muttered.

Quackity ignored him. “Good. Now, Ranboo, if you will.”

Ranboo grimaced and walked around until he stood behind Phil. He pried one of the clamps open and hoisted it above Phil’s right wing, holding it suspended for a moment before he brought it down.

Phil’s entire *being* shuddered as the cold metal contacted his wing, the clamp’s enchantments reshaping it to fit tightly around his primary and covert feathers, holding the limb shut. He could feel it rubbing against his wing’s sensitive skin, could feel as its chilling magic seeped into his flesh, putting a damper on his power. It felt vile and violating and so, so *wrong* in every sense of the word. Any sense of danger fled in an instant as he was possessed by the overwhelming desire to get the clamp *off* and gone, so he would never have to feel its revolting magic again.

He thrashed in the chair, his unrestrained left wing flying out and striking Ranboo square in the face, sending the enderman hybrid reeling back with a hand clutching his nose.

He twisted, and his enraged glare fell onto Fundy. Wilbur’s son. His grandson. The family’s traitor. He wrenched his arms apart, and there was a horrific squealing, shrieking noise the raw power of his adrenaline and fear allowed him to snap the chain that had bound his wrists together. Fundy went pale, backing into the corner as the hybrid began advancing on him, unrestrained wing spread out wide, feathers flared to cut an even more imposing figure.

“Philza,” came Quackity’s voice, low and deadly. He made to turn towards the noise but froze as he felt the cold bite of metal where his back met his bound right wing. “Stop, *right now*, or I will not hesitate to cut your fucking wing off.”

Phil inhaled sharply as coherent thought flooded back into his fear-hazed mind.

He had never before succumbed to the more primal nature that all hybrids possessed, hidden deep within the recesses of their minds. It was a defense mechanism of sorts, granting the ability for their rational minds retreat, for their animalistic half to take control to get them out of dangerous situations. Phil had been pushed close to the edge a few times, but he had never been as overwhelmed as he had just been. It had been *terrifying*, having control of his actions pulled so far out of the reach of his conscious mind.

Phil’s hands shook as he raised them in surrender.

“Good,” Quackity said, but he didn’t retract his sword. “Now, get back into the fucking chair.”

Phil took a few shuffling steps backwards until his knees hit the seat of the chair and he collapsed heavily onto it.

“Ranboo?” Quackity glanced over to where Ranboo was leaning against the wall, still clutching at his bloody nose. The enderman hybrid let out a muffled groan of acknowledgment. Quackity rolled his eyes. “Ok, then. Tubbo, if you’d like to do the honours?”

Tubbo stared at him with wide eyes. “M-me?”

“Yes, Tubbo,” Quackity said, his tone bordering on condescending. “You.”

The president stepped forward hesitantly and picked the second clamp from where it lay discarded. Phil clenched his eyes shut, lowered his head, reached up a hand to tangle it in his hair. Tried to hold back the dread that rose.

Tubbo unlatched the clamp and grunted as he lifted it over Phil’s trembling wing.

No, no, no, he can’t have it happen again, not to his other wing. Not that horrible, nauseating feeling. He can’t experience it again, no, no, no, please—

Phil let out a choked gasp as it dropped down and shrunk until it sat securely around his wing. Once again, the vile sensation swept through him—worse, this time, because that this second clamp had sealed away the entirety of his power—but he made no reaction other than a powerful shudder.

The part of him that had thrown him into the feral state had been locked away along with everything else that made him a hybrid.

Phil wanted to cry.

His head was hung low as Quackity finally sheathed his sword, reached up, and grabbed the two chains that hung from each clamp. The man connected them, securing Phil's wings together and reducing their mobility even further.

“Great!” Quackity said, clapping his hands together. “Now, Ranboo, if you’ll take him to his cell?”

Ranboo let out another groan but this time pushed himself off the wall. He pulled his hand back, glanced at it to see that he’d successfully stopped his bleeding nose, then nodded at Quackity.

Quackity stared down at Phil silently for a moment before he turned, beckoned for Tubbo and Fundy to follow him, and exited the room flanked by the other two. Phil was left alone with Ranboo.

“C’mon,” said Ranboo, looping an arm over Phil’s shoulders and heaving him to his feet. “Don’t make this hard on me.”

“Ranboo, please,” Phil choked out, turning to stare up at the enderman hybrid's multicoloured eyes. He could see something in there, a hint of regret, of pity. He knew he could use in his favour. “You can’t just leave me like this. I know we don’t know each other well, but you’re a hybrid too. You can’t— you can’t imagine how bad this is. Just think about how it would feel if your power was locked away, restrained. Like- like if someone put a binding on your pearl, took away your ability to teleport.”

Something shifted in Ranboo's eyes. He stiffened, his expression spasming for a moment before he shoved Phil forward, sending him staggering down one of the dark corridors that branched off from the room they were in. “I *can*, in fact, imagine that,” he said tersely, voice dark and lined with bitterness.

Phil didn't try again.

Phil glanced around uneasily as Ranboo, whose sympathy had been replaced by something harsh and defensive, led him down a cold stone corridor. Its walls were lined with cells of varying sizes, each containing a sparse array of rickety furniture and chains that hung ominously from their walls and ceilings.

Phil's stomach churned. All the time he'd spent in L'Manberg, and he hadn't even heard a whisper of this prison. Part of him wanted to try again to flee, but Phil knew it would be pointless. His power was blocked by the clamps, and his only possible exit, which was blocked by Ranboo who could teleport and had hybrid strength of his own, would only lead him to a nation full of people who would recapture him. He was smart enough to realise its futility.

Ranboo came to a stop outside one of the cells at the very end of the corridor and pulled a ring of keys from his pocket. He unlocked the door, pushed Phil inside, then stepped in after him.

Ranboo crossed the cell and picked up one of the chains that hung from the wall.

“Oh come on,” Phil said, staring in dismay at the metal in Ranboo's hand. “Surely that’s a bit excessive.”

“It's never up to me,” was all Ranboo said as he hooked the chain to the clamp on Phil's right wing. He deftly repeated the process on the other wing, and then picked up a third and hooked it to the chain that joined the two clamps.

Job done, Ranboo turned and left the cell. He locked the door but paused before leaving entirely, glancing back at Phil who had slumped against the wall, defeated. His voice was a bit softer as he said, "If it helps, I'm sure this won't be permanent."

He was gone before Phil could think to respond, teleporting away in a burst of purple particles.

The silence was oppressive.

With his wings restrained like they were, finding a comfortable way to sit was nearly impossible. Phil spent the first hour of his imprisonment pacing his cell, shifting around what meager furniture it had, trying to distract himself from the nauseating sensation of the clamps, trying to find a way to position himself so he could sit and not have anything pulling at his wings.

He failed.

Phil let out a frustrated groan from where he sat, his left wing being tugged towards where the chain was driven to the wall. He wouldn't be surprised if the cell had been designed specifically so as to be like this. His wrists ached painfully, already raw from where the manacles rubbed against his skin. After breaking their chain in his bout of rage, no one had seen fit to unlatch the shackles from his wrists. Phil leaned his head back until he was staring up at the rocky ceiling.

This was so fucking stupid. This godforsaken country with its backwards legal system and its corrupt government. There hadn't been the faintest *mention* of a trial, nor any chance of probation or eventual freedom besides Ranboo's parting words. His imprisonment, for all he knew, could be a lifelong sentence.

He had never supported Techno's anarchist ideals, but if *this* was what governments were, what they did, maybe he should consider it further. Maybe Techno was onto something. Maybe Wilbur had been right about this nation.

Phil was drawn from his thoughts as the heavy prison door creaked open and he heard light, hesitant footsteps echoing down the corridor.

He pushed himself to his feet and walked over to the cell door, gritting his teeth as the chains yanked him to a halt a few feet away from the bars. Even so, he was able to peer past them and into the dimly lit corridor outside.

He couldn't see anything, but the footsteps were still there, growing closer and closer until—

Tubbo came into view.

Phil bit back a groan, backed away from the bars, and slid back to his previous position against the cell wall. He was only mildly surprised when Tubbo came to a stop outside his cell. Phil closed his eyes, turned his head, and resolved to ignore him.

Five minutes must have ticked by before Phil cracked his eyes open again. Tubbo was now sitting on the stone floor, staring at the ground, picking anxiously at his palm. Had he really been just waiting there this whole time?

"Alright," Phil said after a moment, shifting so he was sitting up straighter against the wall. "I'll bite. Why are you here?"

Tubbo started, his head whipping up to look at Phil. "Oh!" he said, quickly scrambling to his feet. "You're awake!"

Phil scowled at him. “What, did you think I was asleep this whole time?”

“...you weren’t?”

“No, Tubbo, I wasn’t. Now,” he leaned towards the boy on the other side of the bars, “what the fuck do you want?”

“Ah, yeah,” Tubbo lifted a hand to rub at the back of his neck. “I just wanted to say sorry for, uh, for all this. I didn’t really... *mean* for any of it to happen, y’know?”

Phil stared at him with incredulity that was rapidly morphing into a bubbling, spitting anger as the words sunk in. Did Tubbo really think he could do *this* to Phil and then what, offer a fucking apology? Say a few little words and make it all better? He leveled a scathing glare at the boy. “No, Tubbo, I don’t *know*,” Phil hissed, incensed by his audacity. “You didn’t mean for *what* to happen, exactly? You didn’t mean to break into my house? Imprison me? Chain up my wings? *Hunt down my son?*”

Tubbo flinched back, looking miserable. “N-no, that’s not it—”

Phil sneered at the boy. “Oh fuck off, Tubbo. If you’re looking for forgiveness, you’ve come to the wrong fucking place. You’re the president. If you didn’t want this to happen, *it wouldn’t have.*”

Tubbo swallowed heavily and cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice wobbled dangerously. “No, I— you’ve got it wrong, Phil. I-I thought they’d just put you under house arrest, or exile you, o-or something like that. It’s not like you have any attachment to the county, anyway. I don’t know why he wants to keep you here.”

Phil scoffed. “Oh sure. If that’s what you think, then what am I doing here?” He jabbed a finger at Tubbo, and the chain that hung from the manacle still clamped around his wrist rattled as though to emphasise his movement. “As I said: you’re the president. And in this damn country, the president can do whatever the fuck they like. So if that’s what you want, why isn’t it what’s happening?”

“Because Quackity wouldn’t fucking let me!” Tubbo finally shouted back, right before his eyes widened, mortification painting his features as he clamped a horrified hand over his mouth. He let out a shaky laugh. “I-I mean—”

Phil’s brow furrowed as he thought back on how much charge Quackity had seemed to take during the two confrontations he’d had with the group responsible for his capture. “Quackity? How much has he got to do with all this?”

Tubbo shook his head desperately. “None. None at all. He’s got nothing to do with this. You were right. I-I’m the one that wanted you imprisoned.” He took a step back. “I need to go.”

“Tubbo, wait!” he shouted as Tubbo turned and started fleeing back down the hallway. Phil scrambled to his feet and pulled fruitlessly against the chains that held him to the wall. “Don’t go!”

Tubbo pulled open the prison door, threw one last wide-eyed stare back at him, then ducked out of the corridor.

Phil let out a groan. “Great job, Phil,” he muttered to himself, slinking back to his cell wall and leaning his head against it. “You really managed to fuck that one over.”

He tipped his head forward and sighed heavily, resigning himself to the deafening silence of his own thoughts. That had gone horribly, yes, and the thought of Tubbo’s stricken face sent a pang of guilt through his chest. But it had also given him a lot to consider.

What exactly was going on behind the scenes of L’Manberg’s government?

Chapter End Notes

The prison Phil’s in is *not* Sam’s prison, just thought I should make that clear
Also, I love c!Ranboo. He's just going through some shit of his own.

MICH DREW SOME AMAZING [FANART](#) OF TUBBO VISITING PHIL!
THERE’S [ANOTHER](#), BY SUGARFUR, OF QUACKITY THREATENING TO CUT
OFF PHIL’S WING

glimpses of hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil's sleep was uneasy, full of nightmares of crushing chains, restrained wings, and hunters going after his son. He shot up from his cell's lumpy mattress with a shuddering gasp, glancing around wildly for a moment before he grabbed hold of his wits and pulled himself back to his rational mind.

He clenched his eyes shut, took a deep breath, counted to three. He exhaled slowly.

He was okay. He was *okay*.

Phil lay back down on the mattress and glared up at his cell's rocky ceiling. He had nothing to fill the silence, nothing to do but stew in his own thoughts. Time crawled by at a sluggish pace, interrupted only as some guard shoved a tray of food unceremoniously under the door of his cell, metal rattling and screeching against cobblestone. Phil remained still for a few minutes longer. Part of him wanted to just ignore the meal, some petty attempt at defiance, but eventually, he heaved a sigh and dragged himself to his feet. He would at least check it out.

He tried walking over to the bars but was yanked to a halt by the heavy chains that bound him to the far wall, still a few feet away from the food. Phil scowled, crouched down, and still had to strain against the restraints just so he could reach out and snag a finger on the edge of the tray. He pulled it towards himself and considered it silently. A section of it was filled with some viscous, grey mush, set next to a pile of soggy vegetables and a roll of hard bread. The only piece of cutlery was a spoon.

Phil stared for a moment longer before he picked up the tray, stood, and hurled it against the bars of the cell. It collided with a loud, rattling clang, its contents spilling across the floor and into the corridor beyond. He sneered at the mess before twisting and stalking back across the room. This time, he forewent lying on the mattress and instead sat back down on the rough floor, leaning against the wall, tipping his head back against the stone. The cold metal clamps sat heavily on his wings. He could practically feel their cloying power pumping through his veins, subduing the hybrid half of his mind.

Phil had nearly managed to fall into another fitful sleep when he once again heard the prison's iron door screech open. Footsteps echoed through the corridor. He peeled his eyes open and looked up to see that Tubbo was standing outside his cell. His eyes widened. He hadn't expected the boy to return, not after yesterday.

Tubbo swallowed heavily, shuffling his feet, staring resolutely at the mess of food on the floor instead of meeting Phil's eyes. "I shouldn't be here." His voice was quiet, subdued. Almost ashamed.

Phil cocked his head but didn't dare move from where he was seated at the back of his cell, not wanting a repeat of the day before. "Why not?" he said, keeping his tone even. "You're the president."

Tubbo laughed hollowly. "Well, yeah. Not like that actually means anything."

Not five seconds into their conversation, and already Tubbo's words were raising dozens of new questions. Phil pushed down the urge to ask them. He didn't want to scare the boy off again. "Why are you here, then?"

Tubbo shifted nervously, finally raising his eyes to look at Phil. "I-I just had to ask something."

Phil raised an expectant eyebrow.

"If you hate me so much, then why did you let me go?" Tubbo raised a hand to his throat that Phil noticed, with a little stab of guilt, had a small bandage over it. "When you had your, uh, dagger. You could've killed me, or used me as leverage to get out of L'Manberg. But instead, as soon as you got the compass, you just... dropped the knife and shoved me away. Sure, you might have saved Technoblade, but... you could've saved yourself too."

Phil heaved a deep sigh. During the long hours he'd been sitting alone in his cell for, he had wondered a similar thing. He could've easily kept Tubbo as his hostage, used him to avoid this godforsaken situation entirely. But really, in the moment, the only thing he had been thinking about was protecting Techno. He hadn't cared about what happened to him—still didn't care, really. All he wanted was Techno to be safe.

"Well," he said eventually, "I was never actually going to kill you."

Tubbo's eyes widened. "But—"

"It was a threat I had no plans on actually gone through with, Tubbo. You're sixteen, and you're on your last life. I wasn't going to permanently kill a fucking kid."

"Oh," Tubbo said quietly. "But you still just... let me go?"

"I don't know. I guess you were just so *scared*. I felt guilty. So once I had the compass and didn't need leverage anymore, I wanted to let you go. My only goal was to protect my son. I didn't even think to use you to get away myself." Phil huffed out a humourless laugh.

"Maybe that makes me a fool."

"Oh. Well, um. Do you regret it now? Given, well," Tubbo gestured around the little cell, "this."

Phil relaxed back into the rocky wall. "Y'know, Tubbo. I think..." he paused, thinking on the question for a moment, before admitting, "I think I might."

Silence hung heavily in the air.

“But that’s neither here nor there. Regret like that is pointless,” Phil finally said, pushing himself off the ground. “Now that you’ve asked a question, do I get to do the same?”

Tubbo blinked. “Uh. I suppose...?”

“Great.” Phil leaned forward. He wasn't sure if this would work, but it was his only chance at getting answers. The worst Tubbo could do was leave. “Yesterday. What you said about Quackity. Explain.”

Tubbo winced. “Oh, yeah. That.”

Phil narrowed his eyes.

“Well, I feel like I... don’t really have the power to make decisions, anymore. And it's gotten me thinking, I'm not sure I ever *did*. Quackity keeps just... taking control of things. Shutting me down when I try to disagree with him. And Fundy always sides with him, too. It's like he's the one in charge. And I don't know what to do anymore. I don't-” Tubbo let out a shaky little laugh. “It's like I'm not even *there* sometimes, not until Quackity needs the approval of the ‘president,’ or until something goes wrong. *Then* I get dragged into it, so that Quackity can hide behind me, shove it all onto me, say ‘oh well it’s *Tubbo* who’s the president.’ Like I'm the one who ordered any of it!” Tubbo started slow, but the words sped up as he spoke until they were tumbling out of his mouth unthinkingly, unfiltered. As though now that he'd started he couldn't stop. As though hadn’t had anyone to vent to in a long time.

“Like- like there’s this list we made, of people who could pose a danger to L'Manberg. I thought we were making it so... god, I don't even know. It seems so fucking *stupid* of me now, but I thought it was just going to be just so we knew who to look out for! But Quackity, and Fundy with him... they want to hunt them down. Kill them all. And the way he talks about it, it's like they're not even people! Like they're some sort of fucking... pests to exterminate! And that's not even all of it!” Tubbo's voice, which had risen to a nearly hysterical shout, hitched. He shuddered, drawing his arms around himself. “I-I don’t *want* that! I don’t want *that* to be what L'Manberg is. I don’t want that to be my *legacy*, but whenever I try to speak up they just... ignore me, go on to do whatever reckless thing they want. Quackity, the way he's... it almost reminds me of...” Tubbo's voice was choked as he cut himself off, reaching up a hand to brush against the explosion scars that covered the side of his face. He took a deep breath, as though to keep speaking, then froze. The blood drained from his face.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, his eyes wide. He stumbled back a step, horror painting his expression. “Wait, fuck, I-I don't- I shouldn’t have— Phil, wait, please. You can’t tell anyone I said that. Please, Quackity can’t know. I know you don’t—”

Phil cut him off with a dismissive wave of his hand, acting casual to try and alleviate the boy's fears. “Who would I tell, anyway? No one would believe the word of a prisoner over that of the president.”

Tubbo let out a shaky breath. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Phil's lips pressed into a tight line as he considered Tubbo's words. The boy was practically a figurehead. Quackity was taking advantage of his age and inexperience and using it to exert their own power. That much was obvious, and it... actually explained quite a lot.

It wasn't his place to tell Tubbo what to do or to assume any sort of power over him, but the boy needed help. The fact that *Phil*, a prisoner, the man who had attacked him the day before and was withholding the location of a fugitive, was the one that Tubbo had come to talk to... well, that said a lot about the people Tubbo was surrounded by.

"Have you considered," Phil said carefully, knowing that he was treading on unstable ground, "that maybe you should demote them? Find replacements?"

Tubbo shook his head instantly. "I couldn't. They've fought for L'Manberg just as much as I have. They deserve their positions. I-I can't be like Schlatt, demoting and promoting people like that, just because I want to."

"Tubbo," Phil said gently, "you'd be doing it for the safety of your own country. That's- that's the *furthest* thing from Schlatt. Who told you that it would be like him?"

Tubbo cringed back. "I've... I've brought up that idea before. That maybe they'd be better suited somewhere else. Quackity said... that's what Quackity said. He's said it other times, too, with other things I've suggested we do. And he's right, of course. He was Schlatt's VP, he knows what he was like. And I won't, I *won't* turn into *him*."

Phil tugged a hand through his hair. Every word from Tubbo's mouth brushed aside more of the dust that covered the severity of L'Manberg's corruption, and doing anything about it from his current position would be nearly impossible. The first thing he needed to learn more about the problem at hand... but he could also tell that Tubbo was growing increasingly uncomfortable the more they spoke.

So instead, he hummed in agreement and said, "It's okay. I know you won't."

Tubbo blinked at him, surprised. "...yeah?"

Phil nodded. "I think I might've overdone my one question. So... you been doing anything interesting?"

He knew, as tension visibly drained away from Tubbo's shoulders and the boy's entire posture relaxed, that the topic shift had been the right decision.

Countless minutes trickled by as they spoke. Now that they had moved on from politics, there was so much that Tubbo was eager to share. Phil needed to do little more than listen, nodding along with the occasional interjection. He watched Tubbo's mannerisms attentively, noted the way the kid stumbled over his words and backtracked sharply whenever he mentioned something he thought Phil might not like; the way he glanced around nervously every few minutes or whenever a particularly loud slam or creaking groan echoed through the prison; the way he only began to truly relax when their conversation had gone on for a significant time and Phil remained calm and nonjudgemental all throughout it.

Thankfully, there seemed to be nothing physically wrong with Tubbo—no wincing of pain when he jumped up and down as he got excited over a topic, no stiffness or hesitation in his movements when he threw his hands out to animatedly emphasise a point he was making. But those subtle, instinctive attempts to diffuse and avoid any sort of conflict still painted a rather unpleasant picture.

Even without these cues, the fact that Tubbo, the president, was so willing to speak with him, a prisoner, and was consistently thrilled by the slightest shred of enthusiasm Phil showed him, would've told him that something was off.

And while Phil could guess, and suspected that many of his guesses would be close to the truth, ultimately he didn't fully know what was going on. And with his lack of knowledge came an inability to help.

He was determined to change that.

Tubbo had left a few minutes earlier when he'd pilled a clock out of his pocket, realised he was late for some meeting or other, and fled with a hasty, shouted farewell.

Phil thought the boy was probably going to be back. It was a rather comforting thought, the idea that he wouldn't be left alone as the hours ticked on.

He was proven right the next day.

-0-

Phil was certain the conditions of his imprisonment fell short of any sort of regulations and standards regarding such things. He was also certain Quackity, who he knew was the real one behind all this, didn't give two shits about it.

The cold, cramped cell; the sparse, uncomfortable furniture; the meagre meals that Phil didn't touch anyway because no matter how hungry he got, he didn't think he would be able to stomach any food, not with the awful magic of the clamps still bearing down on his wings. The entire thing was horrible and degrading, and it chipped away at his resolve to remain unshaken by the situation.

Maybe that was the point. Maybe it was all meant to slowly weigh him down until he broke.

After all, Phil did still have information Quackity wanted.

("Quackity says we should force you to tell us where Technoblade's house is," Tubbo said one day from where he was sitting, cross-legged, on the ground outside the cell.

Phil shifted uncomfortably. "And? What did you say?"

Tubbo threw Phil an affronted glare, one without any real heat behind it. "You shouldn't even have to ask, Phil! I said no, of course. I would never let that happen."

"And Quackity? How did he respond?"

“He tried to convince me to agree with him. But he gave up eventually.”

Somehow, that did little to reassure Philza of his own safety. From what he'd heard, Quackity rarely gave up without a fight. The man had to be planning something. Phil didn't share his misgivings with Tubbo, though, and instead nodded and said, “Thanks, Tubbo.”

Tubbo had smiled back at him, proud to have protected his friend.)

Tubbo's visits had, somewhere down the line, become an expected part of Phil's day. They were something that broke up the dull monotony of the cell, and also gave him a solid frame of reference for how many days he'd been imprisoned, which meant that the time didn't end up blurring into one painful stretch of hours. So far, five days had passed.

When the chains and magic that weighed down his wings became too heavy to bear and the pain of the manacles that had rubbed his wrists raw became too sharp to ignore; when, as the long hours of isolation stretched on, he couldn't quite fight back the tears that welled in his eyes and splash onto the dirty rock below; when the true hopelessness of his situation threatened to open up below him and drag him into its seething depths:

Tubbo's visits were the one thing that kept him from drowning.

Phil was pretty sure that, for Tubbo, visiting him was one of the few things stopping him from losing complete grasp on the fragile illusion of his own presidential power. Each day the boy would come down the corridor looking more and more miserable, and the stories he shared of his days became more and more about the control his supposed subordinates were exerting over him—though Tubbo, perhaps willfully, still didn't seem to be truly aware of his own situation.

The advice and comfort Phil offered him was a pillar of support as his position crumbled around him, and the subtle urging to push Quackity away, to resist the man's orders and get out from under his control, was quite possibly all that was stopping Quackity from gaining complete power over L'Manberg.

Phil could also tell that Tubbo was struggling with more than just his position. He could tell, just from how desperately trying to find a friend in him, that the boy was painfully, achingly lonely. It was never outright said, of course, but the mere fact that saw fit to set aside a chunk of his day to visit Phil—it spoke all the words that were needed.

Whenever Tubbo left, it was always with a happier expression and a slight spring in his step.

So really, it was a rather win-win situation.

Phil had decided that today he was going to broach a topic that had been weighing heavy on his mind. He'd been avoiding it, unsure of how to approach it, unsure as to how Tubbo would react. It had been five days, though, and he didn't think he could go another with the clamps pinning his wings shut. The weight of their choking power was becoming unbearable.

And so, a few minutes into their conversation, when there was a lull that allowed him to dive right in and ask the burning question, he spoke.

“Tubbo,” he said, and he didn’t know how to ask gently so he just plowed right on, “can you remove the clamps?”

Tubbo froze, staring at him with wide eyes. The air was suddenly as tense as it had been on the first day. “I– what?”

Phil gestured back at his wings. “The clamps.”

Tubbo shook his head, taking a few scuttling steps backwards. “I don’t think I can,” he said, suddenly nervous. “Quackity wouldn’t want me to.”

Phil let out a frustrated exhale, the breath hissing through his teeth. “We’ve talked about this, Tubbo. Quackity isn’t the president, *you* are. You can’t let him rule over your decisions!”

“But what if he does something to me? What then?”

“You’re the *president*, Tubbo! You don’t need to worry about that!”

“Yeah, well maybe I’m the president, but Quackity’s the one that’s got everyone’s support!” Tubbo burst out. He took a few ragged breaths before he continued, the words coming out in a torrent. “You know this! *I know* you know this! It’s half of what you ever want to fucking talk about! He wants power. He *has* power. He wants to make L’Manberg strong, and he’s willing to do whatever he needs to get that. The people... that’s what they *want*. Quackity wants to kill everyone on the hit list, and the people want it too. All I want is peace, Phil. That’s all I’ve been working to get. Peace—that’s what I want my legacy to be. But that—that’s not a sentiment many people share. And so I can’t just go against him. I’m sorry,” his voice was choked. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t help you.”

Tubbo turned and stared down the corridor.

No, no, no, he couldn’t go, he was the only one who could get the clamps off Phil’s wings, he was the only one that could help, no, no, no—

“Tubbo, wait!” Phil cried out, his voice breaking as finally allowed the distress he’d been hiding to bleed into his tone and colour his words with the true desperation he had been shoving down, hiding from Tubbo, hiding from *himself*. Tubbo froze. “Please, Tubbo, wait. You need to get them off. Y-you can’t *imagine* how bad they are. You can’t imagine how they *feel*. I-I don’t think I can keep going with them. I swear, Tubbo, I’m not exaggerating. I’m not lying. I need them gone. I *need* them gone.”

His breaths came in shuddering gasps as the dam that had been holding his emotions back shattered, sending a tidal wave of fear and anger and despair flooding through his system. It was shameful, really, the way he just *broke down* in front of the shocked teenager, but now that the wall had broken, there was nothing he could do but wait the tide out.

Phil didn’t know when it had happened, but at some point, he had fallen to his knees. He was kneeling on the rocky ground of his cell and he found, when he raised a hand to his face, that there were tears staining his cheeks.

Oh.

“Phil?” Tubbo whispered, horrified, once the brunt of Phil’s meltdown had passed. He was crouched right outside the bars, holding them in a white-knuckled grip, as though he wanted to pull them apart to help the shaking man beyond. “Phil, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Are you—are you okay?”

Phil let out a wet little laugh, a sound that was bitter and hopeless and reflected all the pain he felt. He hadn't even known it had been this bad. “What do you think, Tubbo? No. No, I’m not. These clamps. I can’t. I-I just can’t. I need you to get them off my wings, *please*.”

Tubbo took a deep breath. He glanced around quickly, as though expecting someone to be spying on them from the shadows, and then let the air out in a rush. “Ok. Ok, Phil, I can— I can do that. Just give me a moment.”

Phil was left alone as Tubbo darted down the corridor, presumably to get some sort of keys. He pushed himself off the ground slowly, unsure how to feel now that all those bottled-up emotions had come crashing out. In front of Tubbo, no less.

He supposed, if it meant that Tubbo was going to free his wings, that it was a good thing he’d done. The thought made something twist uncomfortably in his chest.

He glanced back at his wings, something he’d been trying to avoid doing since he’d been locked away. He hadn’t wanted to watch as they slowly wasted away. As they were stuck folded shut, he had no way to preen or exercise them, and it had definitely left its mark. The feathers, even in the dim lighting of his cell, appeared dull and lifeless, with none of their usual glossy purple sheen. Many of them were bent or displaced and, he noted with a pang in his chest, some of them had even begun to fall out.

Phil reached up a hand to run it down the wing. Wings were the pride of an avian hybrid’s existence. To have his own in such a horrible state was a disgrace, and even though it was by no means his fault, he still couldn’t quell the feelings of disgust and shame that rose at the sight.

He was pulled from his thoughts as the prison door opened again and Tubbo returned, holding a pair of keys in one hand and what looked like a sort of crowbar in the other. Tubbo unlocked the cell door thoughtlessly but paused before he actually approached Phil.

“You’re not going to... attack me, are you?” he asked, suddenly wary.

Phil blinked at him, then raised his eyes to the open cell door. The idea genuinely hadn’t crossed his mind, but if Tubbo freed his wings...

“Nah,” he said casually, suddenly not entirely sure it was the truth. “But hey, that’s probably what I’d say if I were going to.”

Tubbo shifted uneasily from foot to foot. He turned and locked the door—a meaningless move, as if Phil attacked him he could just grab the keys. He hesitated for a moment longer,

before heaving breath and standing up straight and, seeming to make up his mind, beginning to approach Phil.

The tension that had gathered in Phil's shoulders drained away. He had been worried that Tubbo was going to change his mind and pull the rug out from under the hope he'd allowed himself to feel. But it seemed the boy trusted him. He wasn't sure if it was a good decision.

Phil held his wings still as Tubbo stepped up beside them. He raised the crowbar-like object he held, latched it into something in one of the clamps, and twisted it. The entire thing loosened, the enchantment that had held the metal snugly around his wing broken by whatever Tubbo had done. The boy lifted the clamp up and dropped it to the ground. It rattled as it fell to the cobblestone.

The surge of power that coursed through Phil's veins nearly took his breath away.

Phil began to stretch the wing out but halted the movement as the muscles tightened a cramp that sent flares of fiery agony racing through his shoulders and back. Being stuck in the same position for five days will do that to a muscle, he thought, as he sucked in a sharp breath and held it, trying to ride out the wave of pain.

Fuck, that hurt.

By that point, Tubbo had already walked over to the other wing and repeated the process. Both of the clamps were gone.

Phil was free.

Chapter End Notes

Ever been so lonely that you think to yourself, "hey, you know who's prime friend material? The guy who I just played a large part in terribly and violently arresting!" Yeah Tubbo's going through a lot.

WE'VE GOT SOME [FANART](#) DONE BY WINTER-MORNINGS, AGAIN OF PHIL! HIS EXPRESSION HERE IS HEART-WRENCHING, IT'S SO AMAZING! GO CHECK IT OUT!!

SUGARFUR HAS DRAWN ANOTHER PIECE OF [FANART](#) OF PHIL BEGGING TUBBO TO REMOVE THE CLAMPS!

THERE'S EVEN AN [ANIMATIC](#) OF THE FIRST 11 CHAPTERS OF THE FIC, BY THE SPECTACULAR MOLLY

interlude - ghost

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a reason Ghostbur did everything in his power to avoid intensely negative situations.

Ever since he'd first opened his eyes, since his first thought had flitted through his head and he'd felt his first sensations, he'd had flashes. Flashes of emotions, of fear, pain, and betrayal. They were rarely more substantial than feelings, and they always passed too quickly for him to grasp onto—dissipated like smoke before he could really register their presence—but they were there. They were always there.

Stress, anger, and sadness turned those emotions turn into memories.

They made Ghostbur remember not just feeling betrayal, but the tiny blackstone room he'd been in at the time. They made him remember not just feeling fear, but the podium he'd been standing below, the tyrant he'd been staring up at, at the time. They made him remember not just feeling pain, but the sword that had been stabbed through his chest, the tears that had dripped down his cheeks, at the time.

They made him remember a time when he had laughed and smiled, not while making others happy with his jokes and playful antics, but while watching his brothers grapple, punch, fight each other in a pit, or as an armoured, masked man handed him stacks and stacks of TNT, or as his country burned before him. They made him remember the claws of madness that had sunk into his mind and dragged him down, down, into a bottomless spiral. They made him remember being *alive*.

Afterward, when he held onto some blue or found a different way to make himself happy again, those memories faded.

His knowledge of this was instinctive. He could never *remember* it happening, but he knew it had. He knew it had, and he knew it was something he needed to avoid. He was an echo, a fragment of a broken soul, one that couldn't handle the entirety of who he had once been.

Those memories had the power to shatter him.

-o-O-o-

Ghostbur hummed out a happy tune as he floated along the rolling hills of a flower forest. Slung over one of his arms was a small, hand-woven basket filled to the brim with colourful flowers; yellow dandelions, blue orchids, purple alliums. He stopped, leaned down, plucked a rose from the ground, and added it to the basket.

A branch cracked behind him.

Ghostbur looked up curiously, glancing around the slowly darkening forest. The sun was setting, and there could be any number of hostile creatures lurking in the shadows of the trees. He, of course, didn't have to worry about monsters anymore.

He heard another crackling footstep and turned to see a familiar figure step out from behind the bough of an oak tree.

"Oh!" Ghostbur said, perking up. "Hello, Dream! I was just collecting decorations to bring to Tommy's beach party!" He held out his little basket of flowers. "Do you think they're pretty?"

"Very pretty, Ghostbur," Dream said eventually, his voice cloyingly sweet. "Would you like some help picking more?"

Ghostbur smiled. "Sure! Do you have a basket you can use?"

Dream made a show of glancing around, searching for a basket, before he heaved a heavy sigh and shook his head.

"That's ok! You can use mine instead."

Dream graciously accepted the basket Ghostbur offered him. "Thank you," he said.

Ghostbur hummed a happy little acknowledgment.

After a moment's pause, Dream said, "You know, Ghostbur. There's a flower forest that's even bigger than this one. It's right near one of my bases, so after we pick the flowers we'll be able to make the invites to the party."

"I've actually already made the invites!" Ghostbur reached out to the basket and nudged aside some of the flowers to reveal the pile of envelopes nestled at the bottom.

Dream stared down at the envelopes for a moment. "Well, that's not going to be enough!" he laughed. "You know that we're going to make this party a huge event! We're gonna invite so many more people than that!"

Ghostbur brightened. "Oh, that's a wonderful idea!" he said. "You can lead the way!"

A smile spread across Dream's face, visible just below his mask. "Great!" he said, stepping forward.

Ghostbur floated alongside Dream as he trekked through the hills and plains, chattering happily about anything and everything that came to his mind. Dream listened patiently, kindly, nodding along to what the ghost said and butting in with the occasional little interjection.

"We're nearly there," Dream said as they crested a hill and a towering mansion made of dark oak and blackstone came into view.

Ghostbur blinked, floating a bit higher and looking around. Eventually, he said mildly, "Dream, this is a dark forest, not a flower forest."

"Oh, I know. I was just thinking—do you think we could make the invitations first? My base is just here, and the flower forest is a little further on."

Ghostbur glanced around again, before lowering back to the ground. "I suppose that makes sense. Sure!" They approached the base's entrance. "You know, Dream, I didn't actually know you had a house!" he said. "I think it looks very cool. Very dark, all... brooding, scary wood and stone. It's fitting!"

"I didn't build it." Dream said offhandedly as he pressed a button and the looming blackstone door was pushed aside by a complex piston system.

"Hm?"

"Woodland mansion. I've... renovated it. It doesn't matter." Dream stepped forward as the door finished opening. "Come on," he said, then grinned as Ghostbur followed him without question.

"Where's the paper?" the ghost asked, glancing around the room that was lit only by a blazing fire pit at its centre. "I think we should start writing out the rest of the invites as soon as possible. Then I can go to L'Manberg tomorrow and hand them all out!"

Dream pointed to a small, shadowed room that stood to their right. "Just in there," he said. "Could you grab me a stack too?"

"Sure!" Ghostbur said, floating over to the doorway and ducking into the room. After a few moments he called out, "Dream, there's no paper in here? All I can see are big marble... orbs lining the walls."

"Don't worry about it," said Dream, standing just outside the room. He flicked a lever and the doorway and walls, all engraved with runes that were barely visible against the dark wood, suddenly shimmered with an enchanted barrier.

Ghostbur floated curiously over to the doorway and reached out a hand to touch it. The barrier sizzled and sent a sharp jolt through the ghost's arm, and he jumped back with a surprised yelp. "Dream?" he said. "Dream, I think I'm stuck in here."

Dream turned away from him. "That's the idea."

Ghostbur's eyes widened, and there was a hint of fear in his voice when he said, "Dream, I-I don't think I like this very much. Could you let me out, please?"

Dream ignored Ghostbur and walked to the centre of the room. The ghost cried out in shocked protest as he threw the basket into the fire. The flowers and invites and the basket itself caught alight and were quickly reduced to ash.

"I-I don't... Why would you do that?" Ghostbur asked, staring wide-eyed at the fire. His gaze flicked over to Dream, who now stood at some sort of a control panel. "Please, Dream, just

let me out. I-I don't know what I did wrong but—”

Dream pressed a few buttons and then pulled a lever, and the door to the room Ghostbur was in slammed shut, cutting off his pleas and isolating him in darkness.

Dream flicked another lever and suddenly the claw that hung suspended at the top of the chamber, something Ghostbur hadn't noticed until now, whirred into action. It darted to the side, grabbed one of the marble balls that lined the walls, and brought it back to the centre of the room.

Ghostbur stared up with wide eyes as the contraption crackled with green and yellow sparks, flickering with a soft glow that quickly grew brighter and brighter until it was blinding. He darted over to where he knew the doorway was, clawing desperately at the barrier, biting back cries of pain as the enchantments burned his ghostly flesh.

A ghastly wail was torn from his throat as the power began dragging him towards the orb at its epicentre, and tried desperately to cling to the floor. His efforts were in vain, and it only took a few seconds before he was trapped within its choking confines.

The machine, its job done, shut off, and the doors hissed open slowly.

Dream cocked his head as he stared down at the gently glowing sphere that lay in the centre of the room.

“Two down, two to go.”

Chapter End Notes

Who's that Pokémon?

Also I know, I know, I can hear you guys shouting, “but curseworm, how does Dream know how to do all this?”

I hear you and my answer is, “Ghostbur isn't the first ghost Dream's captured. Dream has had the time to experiment.”

YOOO GUYS THERE'S AN ABSOLUTELY EPIC [ANIMATIC](#) OF THIS INTERLUDE BY MOLLY!!

the winding road of recovery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy's rather dismal escape attempt left him drained of what little energy he'd possessed, and so he fell asleep mere minutes after being laid back on Techno's bed.

Techno wanted nothing more than to do the same, to sit back, kick his legs up, and finally allow himself to sleep for a week, but Tommy had done a number on himself. Techno needed to fix that.

So he picked up his first aid kit, placed it next to Tommy with a sigh, and set to work. Compared to the first time, this procedure was nothing. Just a few scrapes and bruises from throwing himself to the ground and dragging himself across the floor. Techno carefully wiped the blood away from Tommy's skin, patched up the small cuts that littered his knees and hands, and then redressed the stump of his calf.

That wasn't what had worried him, though. The illness that Tommy was afflicted by ran far deeper than his skin, and his escapade into the storage room couldn't have helped. What Techno was concerned about was the damage he must have done to himself, drinking a potion in his state, and the sickness he could still hear in his brother's rattling breaths.

Techno had gotten milk into Tommy's system as quickly as possible, but not even that would be able to stave off the impact the potion's magic would have on him. He could tell by the way Tommy's fever, which had been dropping ever-so-slightly, had come back in a surge and once again raised his brother's temperature. He could hear it in the shallow, wheezing breaths Tommy took as the infection in his lungs, which his body had slowly been battling back, began to worsen. Those minutes under the potion's influence had been brief, but they had crippled his immune system, distracted it from the fight it was raging in his chest.

And the worst part was that Techno had no medicine to give him, nothing that would help except for potions, which would inevitably end up doing far more harm than good.

Techno shouldn't have allowed himself to doze off, not with Tommy in as vulnerable of a state as he was. He should have remained alert and attentive to his brother's state. He should have woken as soon as Tommy had, and helped him through his panic and fear. But he had told himself that it would be okay if he rested for a bit, had slept through Tommy's awakening, and in doing so, he had allowed his brother to hurt himself even further in his rampant fear.

Techno buried his head in his hands, cursing his own failure both as a healer, for allowing any of this to happen in the first place, and as a brother, for the fact that Tommy was so *terrified* of him that he would injure himself like this in his desperation to escape.

This time, at least, Tommy was simply asleep rather than in any sort of coma. It meant that he would awaken if anything went seriously wrong and that hopefully, he would be calmer when

he woke again.

It also meant that Techno could allow his guard to drop, at least for the moment. He could rest properly for the first time in nearly a week. He didn't particularly want to, of course—not after what had happened last time—but his eyes were slipping shut again as the adrenaline that had allowed him to find and treat Tommy wore off, and this time, the consequences of falling asleep would inevitably be less severe.

So, once he had laid a wet cloth on Tommy's forehead to help with his fever and left a glass of honey milk on the bedside table for his brother to drink when he woke, Techno slumped back into his chair and allowed his eyes to close.

He would sleep for a few hours, and hopefully, wake before Tommy did.

-o-O-o-

Sunlight streamed through the paneled windows of Techno's cabin.

Tommy's eyes fluttered open slowly. He rolled onto his side and let out a low groan that was abruptly interrupted by a harsh fit of coughs that tore themselves from his dry throat. Pain stabbed his chest, and each cough was accompanied by a hoarse tugging that made it feel like he was trying to hack out his own lungs.

Not a very pleasant thing to wake to.

It was only once the coughs had subsided, leaving him feeling weak and shaky and gasping for breath, that Tommy allowed himself to slump back into the mattress he lay on.

Hold on.

Why was he on a mattress?

Tommy's brow furrowed as he attempted to drag out his memories of the past few days.

He didn't manage to get anything substantial, his sleep-hazed mind unable to fish up any more than vague flashes of emotions. He remembered miserable long hours of cold, injury, sickness, then overwhelming fear, desperation, terror, and then, very briefly, flickering feelings of warmth, hope, safety. It was that last thing that he latched onto as he pushed himself up, slowly, and glanced around the room he was in. If that was how he had felt just before he had fallen asleep, then surely he was okay now?

He scanned the room slowly, taking note of the dusty bookshelves, the shavings of wood that were scattered around the floor, the dishes and first-aid equipment that lay messily across its various surfaces. It had a generally unkempt, chaotic air.

Then his eyes met with a pair of crimson ones.

Tommy paled and wasn't able to push back the fear that rose at the sight of Technoblade, sitting by his bedside, watching him with a tired expression.

He cringed back as Techno leaned towards him, but his brother only pushed forward a glass of milk that Tommy hadn't previously noticed. "Drink," he said, his voice gruff and thick with sleep. Tommy wondered how long he had been awake. "It has honey in it. You'll feel better."

Tommy reached out hesitantly and wrapped his hands around the glass. The chilled material was cool and soothing against skin that he hadn't realised up until then was flushed, practically burning.

Tommy watched Techno cautiously for a reaction, but the man only continued staring at him with those unsettlingly listless eyes. Heartened by the lack of punishment, Tommy pulled the glass towards himself and cradled it close to his chest.

He sat still, savouring its chill for a few moments before Techno interrupted him with a groan. "I said drink, not caress."

Tommy flinched and nodded quickly, muttering out a quick, hoarse apology before tipping the glass up and gulping it down in a few hasty mouthfuls. Techno's eyes widened and he reached out with a shout of protest. Tommy recoiled at the loud noise, nearly dropping the glass.

"You can't drink it that quickly," Techno scolded as he reached out and snatched the glass from Tommy's trembling fingers. "You haven't been drinking properly in the past weeks, so you've gotta ease into it. You—"

"Sorry," Tommy said quickly, then cringed back as he realised he had interrupted Techno. But he continued anyway, saying, "Sorry, I thought you wanted me to— I didn't mean to upset you. It's my fault. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"Tommy," Techno said, setting the empty glass aside, his voice taking on a gentler air. "Hey, it's okay. You're fine. You just have to be more careful."

Tommy nodded quickly. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, of course. I'll be more careful next time. I'm sorry."

The words grated on Tommy's throat, raw from disuse, but he had to make sure Techno knew. That way maybe he'd be able to alleviate some of the punishment that had to be coming.

"Do you want another drink?"

Tommy opened his mouth to blurt out a quick negative answer, but hesitated. The milk had actually been... *really* nice. He hadn't realised it when he'd awoken, but his insides felt like they were *burning*, like there was something, some fiery force, eating away at them. The milk had soothed that. So Tommy, his movements laced with hesitation and fear, nodded slightly.

Techno huffed an acknowledgement, picked up the glass, and made his way out of the room.

Tommy was left alone to contemplate the bizarreness of his situation.

He still wasn't exactly sure what had happened preceding his awakening. His memories all seemed a little fuzzy around the edges, like they were all submerged in a pool of murky water and had to be dragged out before Tommy could properly see them.

Tommy, of course, was not afraid to get his hands wet. So he focused hard on the memories, reaching in and beginning to pull them out.

There was a dizzying mix of pain and fear, but one thing stood out amongst them, amongst the most recent ones. He couldn't stand. He had fallen down, been crawling across the floor, dragging himself across the ground, because he *couldn't stand*.

Tommy hastened to throw off the thin sheet that covered his body, and stared down in horror at the sight he was met with. Because the hazy memories had been right. His foot was gone. His fucking right foot was gone.

He looked up sharply as he heard a gentle tapping on wood, and saw Techno standing in the doorway, his arm raised, knocking to let Tommy know he was back. In one hand, the one he had knocked with, he held the refilled glass of milk, and the other held a steaming bowl of... something.

"What did you do to me?" Tommy whispered, his eyes sliding back to the stump of his calf.

"Tommy," Techno said carefully, walking across the room and setting his cargo down on the bedside table. "I did what I had to."

"You—" Tommy fell silent as he stared down at his leg, fighting back the bile that threatened to rise. He didn't, however, fight back the anger that accompanied it. "You cut off my leg. You cut off my fucking leg. And what, you *had to*? You had to what? Fucking *maim* me? Techno, you- you've fucked me up. You fucking— y-you didn't have to—"

Tommy took a shuddering breath, realising quite suddenly that there were tears falling from his eyes. He raised a hand to wipe them away and only then saw just how bony his arms were. He stared down at his hands, at his long, spindly, *frail* fingers, for a long moment, before rather abruptly heaving in a breath and burying his head in his hands, clenching his fingers in his filthy, matted hair, not even trying to hold back the sobs that wracked his emaciated form.

"Oh, Tommy," Techno sighed, stepping forward and placing a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder. Tommy tensed under the unwelcome touch but, after a few moments passed and nothing else came of it, relaxed slightly.

Tommy shook his head wordlessly, too overcome by emotions to do anything but weep. Techno crouched down next to the bed, put his other hand on Tommy's shoulder, and pulled him towards his chest, enveloping him in a soft hug.

The teenager's breath hitched fearfully, and he once again stiffened in Techno's arms, but his expectations were once again undermined as his brother did nothing but hold him in the warm, comforting hug. Eventually, he allowed himself to lean into it.

“I didn’t want to,” Techno said. “Believe me. You have no idea how much I hated it. But your foot was- it was *gone*, Tommy. I couldn’t have done anything. I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong with me, Techno? Why am I-” Tommy was cut off by a fit of hacking coughs, and Techno stepped back to avoid the spittle that flew from his mouth.

Tommy gasped in a few wheezing breaths, struggling to inhale properly, and Techno watched anxiously until he finally caught his breath and took a few regular, if a bit shallow, breaths.

“Here,” Techno said quietly, picking up and holding out the milk he’d gotten.

Tommy took it gratefully and drank it, slower this time. Once he was done, he carefully set the glass aside, and asked, “Will I ever be able to walk again?”

Techno nodded, and Tommy let out a relieved exhale. “Here,” Techno leaned down and picked something from the ground. “It’s not much, not yet, but, well,” he held it out and showed Tommy the temporary wooden prosthetic he’d hewn from a spruce log. “I’m going to work on designing a better one for you. With Phil, probably, if- *when* he gets home.”

At the mention of their father, Techno had raised one of his hands to the gently glowing emerald that hung against his chest. As soon as he realised what he’d done, he dropped the hand with a quick shake of his head.

“Can I try it on?” Tommy asked carefully, gesturing at the prosthetic.

Techno nodded but didn’t hand over the leg. “First,” he said, and Tommy tensed, but Techno only turned and picked up the steaming bowl he’d brought in. It was full of some sort of broth. He held it out. “Eat.”

Tommy stared down at it apprehensively. “I’m not hungry,” he muttered.

Techno bit back a sigh. Tommy had pneumonia. Of course, he wasn’t going to feel hungry. But he still needed to eat. “Tommy,” he said, almost warningly. “You need to eat something.”

Tommy winced but shook his head resolutely. “I’m not hungry,” he repeated.

“*Tommy*,” Techno said, and this time he couldn’t quite hold back the sharpness and frustration that bled into his tone. He was tired, and his patience was thin. Over the past six days, he’d gotten under ten hours of sleep, and now that his brother was awake, he was refusing to take this small action that was *for his own good*. “It’s just broth. It’s not even food. You were more than happy to have the milk. Would it be better if I told you to drink it? Will you have it then?”

Tommy flinched at the sharp tone, then reached out with shaking hands and wordlessly took the bowl from Techno, who blinked in surprise. “Tommy...?” he said, suddenly unsure.

He wasn’t going to protest the fact that Tommy was doing as he was told, but, well... it wasn’t like him to just give in like that. And the way Tommy’s fingers trembled as they wrapped around the spoon, the way he began eating the soup like his life depended on it, such a sharp

contrast to his protest mere moments before. It put Techno on edge. There was something going on here, something that he was missing. And, from the looks of it, it was nothing good.

Tommy set the now-empty bowl down, shooting Techno a hesitant glance. “I’m really sorry,” he said softly. “I-is that what you wanted?”

Tommy fidgeted nervously as Techno stared at him for a long moment, before he finally nodded and said, “Yes, Tommy. Thank you. You don’t need to apologise.”

Tommy looked unconvinced but muttered out a quiet acknowledgement. It sounded like he was holding back to urge to just apologise again.

Tommy made to swing his legs over the side of the bed but stopped with a groan as the headache that had been throbbing behind his temples worsened. He raised a hand to his head, rubbing at the flushed skin in an attempt to lessen the pain. “I don’t know if I want to get up, actually,” he confessed. “I don’t feel so good.”

Techno sat back, setting the prosthetic back onto the wooden floor. “Do whatever you think is best,” he said.

Tommy nodded. “I think I’d like to-” a few coughs tore themselves from his throat, and, once the fit had subsided, he slumped into the bed with another groan, his eyes slipping shut. “I think I’d like to go back to sleep.”

“Yeah,” Techno said quietly. “Yeah, you do that.”

Techno had experience caring for Tommy when he was sick. He hadn’t done it in years, but back when they were kids he had done it countless times. His brother had always been loud and energetic, even when weighed down by infection or injury—always insisting that he was okay, that he was fine, that the rest of his family should just piss off with their stupid, worried hovering.

One time, Tommy had gotten severely ill at a time he’d been too young for him to safely drink potions. Things had gotten really bad, the infection almost costing him one of his lives. Throughout it all, he had remained loud and cheerful and optimistic, never losing any of his usual energy. If anything, even as young as he had been, it had been *Tommy* that comforted his anxious family, reassuring them that things were going to get better.

Seeing Tommy like this was unsettling because it was just so *wrong*. Back when he had been a teenager and Tommy had been a little tyke, Techno had found himself hating how high-energy he was, had found the boy so horribly annoying that he occasionally caught himself considering how viable teeth-pulling would be as an alternate option. But now, seeing Tommy like this, he almost *missed* it.

There had been some small part of Techno that had almost expected Tommy to just... go back to normal once he woke, once he was lucid again. It seemed ridiculous, looking back on it, but the hope had been there. And even if Techno hadn’t held those expectations to begin with, he never would’ve expected Tommy to be quite *this* beaten down.

Something had happened, something that extended far deeper than his injuries and sickness. Someone had done this to his brother.

Techno's hand clenched around the hilt of the sword hanging by his waist. When he got a name, he would hunt them down. And it wouldn't be pretty.

Chapter End Notes

THIS CHAPTER HAS [FANART](#)!! It's by Kuro and is of Techno holding his friendship emerald!!

and heart breaks

Chapter Notes

Happy 2 week anniversary to the fic lmao

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy didn't seem to get better.

He was, of course, healthier than he'd been during the five long days he'd been in a comatose state, and healthier still than he had been when Techno first found him—not that either of those said very much. He was conscious most days, though he did sleep for far longer than usual. That, at least, was to be expected, given his illness.

What wasn't to be expected, however, was the burning fever, hacking coughs, and general malaise that just wouldn't let him free from their clutches.

That wasn't to say that nothing had changed, of course. Now that Tommy was slightly more aware, Techno was able to lessen his vigilance, had a bit more time to himself, resting, mining, farming.

Usually, in a situation like this, where Tommy began spending more and more time conscious, it would mean that his caretaker would have less time to themselves; the teenager's boisterous presence and constant need for attention removing their chance to get any sort of a break. But this time, with his uncharacteristically subdued nature, that wasn't the case.

Tommy put on a front of his usual self. He was loud and obnoxious, poking and prodding at Techno, trying to get a reaction out of him. But ultimately that's all it was. A front. It wasn't difficult to see through its cracks, to see the subtle fear and wariness that lined his every word and action.

The caution was so unlike his brother, who usually dove headfirst into whatever reckless, impulsive action he thought up, unknowing and *uncaring* of its effects or consequences. It was that frame of mind that had led to his exile in the first place—the exile that had caused all this and that Techno still knew next to nothing about. All Techno knew was what Phil had been able to tell him. Tommy had grieved George's house, Dream had threatened L'Manberg, Tubbo had exiled Tommy, and Dream had been the one to escort him out.

The voices, even with their seemingly otherworldly knowledge, were of little help. Every time Techno's thoughts turned to the cause of Tommy's current state, they flew into a frenzy of chants of *blood* and *death*, but weren't considerate enough to tell Techno *who* it was that they wanted him to channel their bloodlust towards. And when they were in a state like that, there was no reasoning with them, no way to actually get answers.

If anything, the voices were the reason Techno hadn't had the time to think over what he knew and find the answer himself. When they got like that they often suffocated his own thoughts, which served to make rational, logical deduction rather difficult.

It certainly wasn't helped by the fact that they were more active than usual. As pneumonia could be contagious, Techno had taken to drinking a regen potion at the end of each day to stop himself from contracting it. The resistance to a potion's 'high' that Techno had developed over the years hadn't faded with his lack of recent potion use, which meant he wasn't as affected as others may have been, but the constant magic had given the voices more energy and power than they had had since he'd entered his retirement and stopped drinking potions. Their previous quietness meant Techno had grown complacent and lost some of his ability to control them.

Techno had also been avoiding broaching the topic with Tommy, aware of how it would probably trigger a situation that he'd rather avoid. He would bring it up eventually, of course. Once he was confident that Tommy would feel safe enough around him to talk about it.

For now, though, he focused on nursing Tommy back to health.

Techno let out a sigh as he set down the bucket of thick honey he had just collected. There was a small cellar next to his house that was full of the sugary liquid, contained in buckets, barrels and bottles. There was no real way he could put it all to use, of course, but he and Phil had spent days setting up the bee farm and he'd be damned if he just let it go to waste.

Techno brought a hand to wipe at his brow, clearing it of the beads of sweat that had gathered as he worked. He turned and climbed up from the cellar, emerging into the main room. Tommy lay on one of the couches, his eyes closed, quiet snores coming from his half-open mouth.

Techno sighed again as he crossed the room, kneeling by his brother's sleeping form. He lay a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him awake.

"Tommy," Techno said quietly as his eyes fluttered open. "You're at Technoblade's house. You're with your family. You're warm, you're protected, you're safe." It had become a tradition of sorts. Whenever he had to wake Tommy, he'd say those words. It helped alleviate the panic that would otherwise accompany the awakening—though Techno would often still see fear flash across his brother's face before he fully gained his bearings.

"Hey, Techno," Tommy murmured drowsily as he laboriously pushed himself into a seated position.

Techno sat on the couch next to him. "Have you eaten today?"

The guilty flicker in Tommy's eyes answered the question perfectly.

Techno let out a frustrated groan. "Tommy, you need to eat."

"I know, I know! I just... I'm not hungry, man. I'm never hungry. I'll drink as much water as you want me to, sure, but I can't eat."

“It’s your illness,” Techno said. “It takes away your appetite. But I can assure you, Tommy, you *are* hungry. Your body is practically screaming for food. And I can’t give you potions until you have more energy in your system.”

“Yeah,” Tommy muttered. “Yeah, okay. Sorry.” He made to get off the couch, but stopped, staring down at the prosthetic that sat in the place of his right foot. “Could you bring me something, please?”

Tommy was far from proficient at walking on his prosthetic leg. He could usually stumble across a room without support from an outside source, but it was a taxing process, and something Techno insisted he avoid.

It was still better than the first time he’d tried, though. That had been an embarrassing affair.

(“I want to get up,” Tommy whined from where he lay on Techno’s bed. Techno glanced up from the book he was reading. “This bed is stupid. Can I get up?”

It was only the fifth time he’d asked.

Techno set his book to the side and stood with a sigh. “I’m going to feel your temperature,” he said, verbally warning Tommy of the move he was about to make before he reached out and pressed his hand against his brother’s flushed forehead.

“Well? What’s the verdict, Big Man?” Tommy asked after a moment, and Techno could hear the nervousness behind the brash words.

“There’s no change.” Of course, feeling temperature by hand was an unreliable way of measuring it, but despite all his equipment, Techno had found that a thermometer was one thing he lacked. It was something he would fix, once all this was over.

Tommy groaned. “I feel fine, though!” he exclaimed. His point was proven wrong as his shout upset something in his lungs and he was possessed by a fit of coughing that rattled his chest and left him wheezing for air.

Techno cocked his head to the side. “You feel fine?”

Tommy deflated. “Please?”

Techno clenched his jaw, his brows furrowing slightly as he considered Tommy, before he turned sharply, bent down, and picked up the wooden prosthetic from the ground. It was more refined than it had been when Tommy had originally woken, and would definitely be functional, but it was still just a temporary solution.

Now that Techno had time to spend doing things other than his worried hovering, he could start designs for a more permanent fix.

Despite its imperfections, Tommy’s eyes still lit up at the sight of the foot. “Wait, really?” he asked, excited.

Techno grunted in agreement and Tommy reached down to pull aside the sheets that covered his legs. Techno stepped forward and crouched by the bed, holding out the prosthetic and setting its padded top against the stump of the leg. Tommy flinched as the wool brushed against the flesh, but kept watching, enraptured, as Techno wrapped the leather straps tightly around his calf and thigh, fixing the prosthetic in place.

By the time Techno stepped back, Tommy was practically vibrating with excitement, his previous fear all but forgotten. Techno watched, a rather melancholy smile playing over his face. He knew that this was going to end badly—was only letting Tommy try it out so that he'd stop bugging him to let him walk—but even so, seeing his brother act with such vibrance, so much like his old self, brought forth a rather unexpected swell of nostalgia.

Tommy swung his legs off the side of the bed and, without any hesitation, pushed himself to his feet. "Oi, Technobitch, watch me run!" he shouted, taking a step forward—

And promptly overbalancing and falling into Techno's waiting arms.

Techno raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

Tommy's face, already flushed from fever, turned even redder. "You, shut the fuck up.")

Suffice to say, Tommy had more experience walking with the prosthetic now than he had a few days ago.

Either way, Techno nodded shortly and stood, making his way to the kitchenette that was tucked into the corner of the room. He picked a bowl out of a drawer, spooned in a serving of the soup that he always kept simmering on the stove for cases like this, and also grabbed a small roll of bread he'd baked earlier in the day.

It was unlikely that he would be able to get Tommy to eat much of the soup, let alone the bread, which was far more substantial, but there was no harm in trying.

Techno set the food on the small table by the couch and watched as Tommy let out a few coughs before pulling the bowl onto his lap. He stared into it for a long moment before scooping up and eating a half-hearted spoonful of soup.

Tommy glanced over at Techno. "Is that good?"

Techno didn't grace him with a response.

Tommy sighed and ate another spoonful. He kept going until the bowl was half-empty and then pushed it to the side. "I can't keep going."

"Asking you to eat some bread would probably be useless, then?"

Tommy nodded. "I'm sorry, Techno. I know you want me to eat. I just... I *can't*."

"Don't apologise," Techno said gruffly. "It's not your fault. And besides, you'll get better soon. Then you'll be eating me out of my house."

Tommy cracked a small grin. “Yeah,” he said, then broke into another coughing fit.

Techno stood, quickly filled a cool glass of water, and handed it to Tommy, who had been left gasping for breath. He gratefully accepted the water and swallowed a few mouthfuls, before setting it to the side and lowering himself until he once again lay flat.

“Thanks, Techno,” he said quietly.

Techno stared at him worriedly for a moment before nodding in acknowledgement. “Yeah. You need anything else?”

Techno almost wished Tommy would take the opportunity to make some stupid joke about women or drugs, so that he could tip his head back, groan angrily and mutter that he shouldn’t have even tried. But instead, his brother hesitated before saying, quietly, “Do you think you could get a cloth for my forehead? My head still feels like it’s burning up.”

Techno’s eyes widened as he realised that the bowl of water and the towel he usually soaked in it, to help with Tommy’s fever, had been left upstairs, in the room his brother had previously been staying in. Tommy had insisted that he be allowed to lie on the couch downstairs, in the cabin’s main room, because he was “bored of the stupid room” he’d been stuck in. Techno had the sneaking suspicion that he’d been getting lonely. And so, earlier that day, Techno had helped his brother downstairs and onto the couch. But in doing so he had, apparently, left the towel and water upstairs.

“You should’ve told me I’d left it up there,” Techno scolded.

Tommy winced. “It wasn’t a big deal. I didn’t want to bother you. I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t a-” Techno shut his eyes and inhaled deeply. “Tommy. You have pneumonia. You’re literally burning with fever. To top it all off, you’re still too weak to be administered potions. You probably feel so much worse than you’re letting on to me-” Tommy’s eyes widened, and Techno resisted the urge to groan. “Yes, Tommy, I know you’re hiding some of your symptoms. It’s something you need to stop doing, by the way. But that’s beside the point.” Techno waved his hand in the general direction of the other room. “That cloth is one of the few things that make your situation somewhat more bearable for you. You not having it *is* a big deal.”

“Yeah,” Tommy muttered, his eyes fixated on the floor. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, Tommy. It’s okay. As long as you still have what I gave you? You didn’t leave that upstairs?”

Tommy glanced down at the treasure clutched in his hand. “Yeah,” he said. “You still haven’t explained what it does, though. You just gave it to me and insisted I didn’t let go.”

Techno shook his head. “You don’t want to know what it is. It’s just- it’s a precaution. But you won’t have to use it.”

Tommy squinted at him. “That makes no sense. But go off, I guess.”

Techno rolled his eyes and pushed himself to his feet. “I’m going to go get the cloth for you. Stay here.”

“What else am I going to do? Run away?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you. You’ve tried before. This time you’d actually *have* a leg to walk on.”

“Too shay,” Tommy muttered, enunciating each syllable as separate words.

“It’s pronounced touché.”

“And you’re a fucking bitch, but I don’t mention that every time, do I?”

Techno heaved a heavily dramatised sigh and left the room, just barely hiding the small grin that stretched across his face.

By the time he returned to the room, bowl and towel in hand, Tommy had already slipped into a fitful sleep.

-0-

From there, Tommy’s state only deteriorated.

Though there were times when he woke and acted relatively normal, when he insisted that he was fine and that Techno’s worried stares and concerned questions were just his brother being an “overprotective twat,” they were few and far between.

Most of the time when he woke he was less lucid and more feverish than the time before. The intervals between his coughing fits became shorter as each one grew more intense, leaving him gasping for breaths that wouldn’t come and struggling to clear his mucus-clogged throat, and as the days passed his breathing steadily became shallower and more choked.

The worst part was that, no matter how much he wanted to help, there was little Techno could do but wait and hope for the best.

What he could do, however, he did tirelessly. Whenever a hacking fit of coughs woke Tommy, Techno was there to calm him, hand him a drink to soothe his sore throat, and then use his temporary consciousness to urge him to eat some food. Whenever Tommy woke naturally and was lucid enough to speak and be aware of his surroundings, Techno was there to talk to him, comfort him and make sure he wasn’t lonely or scared. And even when Tommy’s periods of unconsciousness stretched on for hours, Techno was still there, replacing the wet cloth on his forehead, wiping away the sweat that soaked through his clothes and hair, watching over him and waiting for the next time he awoke.

In the days after Tommy had originally woken, things had momentarily seemed to get better. But that had been an illusion, almost as though Tommy’s body, invigorated by his sudden return to consciousness, had granted him a temporary burst of wellness. But now that was wearing off, and Techno’s days were slowly turning back into the long, quiet ones he’d spent during Tommy’s coma.

It was rather ironic, but as Tommy's bouts of awareness continued to become shorter and shorter, so too did the time Techno spent away from his bedside.

Control was slipping through Techno's fingers and he didn't know what he could do to stop it.

He didn't know if there was *anything* he could do to stop it.

More than anything, Techno wanted Phil's help. Phil would know what to do. He *always* knew what to do. He'd take one look at Tommy's state, ask for some equipment, and then magically be able to make everything better.

But Phil still hadn't come home.

And Techno was still alone.

-0-

The next day, Tommy's condition decided to take another turn for the worse.

Techno hovered anxiously at his brother's bedside, holding a regen potion in both his hands, listening to Tommy's shallow, choked breaths, staring down at his gaunt, feverish form.

Potions could be a fatal treatment.

Pneumonia could be a fatal infection.

Techno didn't know what chance he wanted to take. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know how all the effort and hard work he'd put into healing Tommy was falling apart so quickly, all of it unravelling at the seams.

Maybe it was the potion Tommy had drunk, all those nights ago, that had knocked aside a piece and begun the collapse of the fragile house of cards that was his health. Maybe it was his lack of appetite that had meant that, even with all of Techno's urging and encouragement, he had eaten such a meagre amount of food over the past week and his malnutrition had only worsened. Maybe it was Techno's own incompetence as a healer, the fact that he hadn't been enough to help Tommy, that all his effort and resources had fallen short of the treatment he needed, that he had tried and tried *and tried but he wouldn't, he would never be able to do anything because—*

Calm, calm, said the voices, cutting through the despair that had begun to cloud his mind. *Help Tommy, treat Tommy, save Tommy.*

Techno grit his teeth and shook his head. They were right. Giving up was a guaranteed way to *not* save Tommy.

Techno glanced down at the artefact still clutched in Tommy's hand. If worse came to worst, there was always... *that*. But if he could help it, if he could have *any* say in the matter, then Tommy would never have to feel the touch of such dark magic. And so Techno settled down for a long night of caring for his brother. He could do this. He could save him.

Hours passed and Tommy's breathing grew steadily weaker.

The sun was rising, and Techno was losing hope.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what he could do. The blaze powder in potions would kill Tommy, leaving him untreated would likely do the same, and he had nothing else he could give him. Nothing that already existed, at least.

Create, said the voices. *Make potions. New potions.*

It's not like he had any other ideas. So Techno, in an act of desperation, pulled out a brewing stand and began something he never thought he'd do. He started experimenting. Magic was a volatile and dangerous thing, and using unverified ingredients, let alone *power sources*, to try and brew potions could have catastrophic consequences. Techno didn't care.

He needed to save Tommy.

He rooted through his chests to find something to use instead of blaze powder, some substitute for the fiery magic that powered most potions, and pulled out a deep blue sphere he'd found during his adventures, in a shipwreck he'd explored. He knew its name from the books he'd collected over the years—a heart of the sea—but had never actually used one before, didn't know *what* they could be used for.

Techno had been meaning to ask Phil what it was for but had never gotten around to it. He knew it was magical, at least—he could practically sense the potential energy that rolled off it in waves—but that was the extent of his knowledge. Maybe, though, its ocean-based magic would make for a substitute to that of blaze powder, the very reason Tommy couldn't drink potions in his current state. That, at least, had been his logic when he'd taken it from the chest, ground it into a fine dust, and sprinkled it into the tubes that spiralled into the bottles, that usually held blaze powder.

But now, staring down at the awkward potion he'd brewed using the substitute power, Techno realised how stupid he'd been. Usually, the only change between water and an awkward potion was its consistency—the potion being a far more viscous liquid—but this time the water had shifted into a shade of deep blue. That proved that there was some sort of magic at work, at least, but he doubted it was what he wanted. Of course it wasn't what he'd wanted. Magical experimentation, especially when it was *this* impromptu, never worked out well.

But...

Techno grit his teeth together and threw a glance at Tommy, at the weak, shallow rise and fall of his chest. He steeled his resolve. He couldn't stop.

He pulled out a ghastr tear, held his breath, and dropped it into the potion. The brewing stand pulsed with a wave of power as the crystallised tear was absorbed into the potion, and the liquid shifted into a murky shade of red. It lacked the usual sheen of purple that came with potions, instead pulsating with a regular blue glow.

It didn't look safe. It didn't look very safe at all.

Techno gingerly picked up the bottle, watching as the liquid, which was far thinner than a potion should be, sloshed around inside.

He crouched by Tommy's side, lowering his head as he weighed his options, each as unappealing as the other.

Potions could be a fatal treatment.

Pneumonia could be a fatal infection.

Improper potions could be fatal, period.

The voices were speaking too quietly for him to make out their words, but the frenzied, panicked tones of their mutterings told Techno all he needed to know. They were arguing amongst themselves. They knew just as little as he did.

Tommy exhaled a gargling, choked breath. In the otherwise silent the room it seemed suffocatingly loud.

The lack of an inhalation seemed even louder.

Techno's head snapped up, his eyes wide.

No, no, no, the voices screamed, abruptly unified, loud and clear enough for him to understand.

Techno dropped the potion in his haste to raise his hand to Tommy's throat, feeling desperately for the weak, fluttering pulse that would be there. That *had* to be there.

No, no, no, no.

Beneath his trembling fingers, the skin was still.

The voices let out a keening wail of despair.

Tommy's heart had stopped beating.

Chapter End Notes

MOLLY MADE ANOTHER [ANIMATIC](#), OF THE FINAL SCENE OF THIS CHAPTER! (It says chapter 13 in the title because when i posted this chapter it was originally chapter 13, but then i moved the ghostbur interlude)

soul-deep regrets

Chapter Notes

Happy 2021! Here's to it hopefully being better than 2020 lmao

The temptation to make this a Phil POV was so strong but I resisted

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno dropped his head into his hands, holding back the snarl that threatened to rise from his throat. “Fuck,” he muttered. He stood and turned sharply, barely able to resist the urge to lash out at something. “*Fuck.*”

Behind him, the totem clutched in Tommy’s hand began to glow with bright hues of yellow and green as its power was activated. Techno didn’t turn to look, refused to watch the evidence of his own failure.

Techno slammed his fist into the wall of his cabin. The wood cracked and splintered under the force of the blow. All the anger and frustration and *fear* he’d been bottling up over the past however many days, as he watched Tommy slowly wither away, as he watched all his efforts to help him fall short of what his brother needed, were beginning to slip past the tight wall that kept them buried.

Techno clenched his eyes shut. His turbulent emotions had made the voices, already loud in their unified despair, grow until they were practically deafening. He could feel his heartbeat pounding in his chest and wrists and temples. It was loud. It was too loud. It was all too loud.

Surely one totem would be fine. Surely Tommy would be okay. One totem wouldn’t do to him what it had done to Techno.

It was just one totem.

His soul would be fine.

The cabin exploded in a shower of green and yellow. The light shone from within Tommy’s body, sparks flying from his eyes and mouth and bathing the cabin in the blinding light.

Techno reached up to tangle his fingers in his hair, falling to his knees, dragging his hands down his face.

He couldn’t be angry when Tommy woke. He *couldn't* be angry, or scared, or *anything*. His brother would think it was directed at him and would react accordingly. In the hyperactive state Techno knew he would be in as the effects of the totem wore off, that could be

disastrous. Techno opened his eyes, desperately tried to shove everything into the recesses of his mind, took and held one deep, shuddering breath, and turned back around.

The light around Tommy had faded but for a dull glow emanating from his chest and head.

A visible haze of magic hung around him, a visible indicator of the boon the totem had granted him.

He was breathing. His skin was a healthy pallor. The totem had healed him.

Techno had failed.

Tommy's eyes snapped open, bright and wide and full of wild energy and fervour. He shot into a sitting position, practically vibrating with the power of the totem, and glanced around the room. His eyes settled on Techno and a jubilant grin stretched over his face.

"Technoblade!"

Techno shoved a strained smile onto his face. "Hello, Tommy."

Tommy shoved the blankets off his legs. "You know, Techno, I just had the strangest dream. It..." his brows furrowed as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. "It wasn't very nice. Not at all. You did some, uh, bad things." His eyes widened again. "Oh! And I lost my-"

Tommy was cut off with a yelp as he pushed himself to his feet and tumbled to the ground.

"...foot," he finished slowly, staring down at the stump of his leg.

Techno sighed. "It wasn't a dream, Tommy."

Tommy shook his head earnestly, looking back up at Techno and seeming to forget about his leg entirely. "But it had to be! 'Cause at the end of it I died."

Techno knelt down and held out a hand to help Tommy to his feet. "I took precautions."

Tommy laughed, ignoring Techno's proffered hand, seemingly content to remain on the floor. "You can't take precautions against dying, Techno."

"You have a lot to learn about the world."

"Well I think you're just being stupid," Tommy said with finality.

Techno stared blankly at his brother for a few moments before heaving a sigh and pushing himself to his feet. "Give me a moment," he said, making his way across the cabin, to the kitchenette.

Over the years, Techno had never seen a reaction quite like this one to a totem of undying. Of course, everyone reacted differently—it was the very nature of the soul-magic—but the effects of totems often manifested as the user lashing out, enhancing their negative emotions,

making them aggressive or scared. That, paired with the enhanced power and strength that came with the totem, could have disastrous consequences.

In this case, however, Tommy's magic-addled mind seemed to be refusing to, or *unable* to, come to terms with its situation. Techno didn't know what exactly was going on—whether it was just confusion or delirium or something more severe like amnesia—but after everything that had happened, he... wasn't especially worried.

Effects of using one totem almost always faded.

It was using multiple that had permanent consequences.

Either way, it was Techno's hope that the magic-nullifying properties of milk would help speed up the process. So he grabbed a glass, filled it with milk, and brought it back to Tommy. His brother was staring at him with a furrowed brow and a vacant, confused sort of expression, as though he wasn't sure exactly what either of them were doing there.

Techno knelt beside him and wordlessly held out the glass.

Tommy took it, glanced down at it, and then up at Techno. "Should I... drink it?"

Techno nodded patiently.

Tommy shrugged and tipped the glass back. Techno let out a relieved breath as the haze of magic faded. Tommy's shoulders slumped.

"How do you feel?" Techno asked softly.

Tommy blinked, clenched his eyes shut, shook his head slightly, then opened his eyes again. The absent, glazed look was gone. "Whoa," he said. "This feels really fucking weird."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"I dunno. It's like I'm... I dunno how to explain it."

Techno raised an eyebrow. "An incredibly astute description right there," he said dryly.

"Oh shove off," Tommy groaned, setting the glass to the side and leaning back until he lay against the floorboards. "It's in a bad way."

"Yeah," Techno sighed. "Yeah, I think I know how you feel. I've had... *many* similar experiences." He knelt by his brother, sliding his arms underneath him and pulling him up. "C'mon, let's get you back to bed."

"Don't treat me like that. I'm not a child."

"Of course not, Tommy. But you *were* literally just lying on the floor."

"You've got a point," Tommy admitted as Techno lay him back onto the mattress.

Techno snorted. “Of course I do,” he said. “Lie here a moment, I need to go...” he threw a glance at the brewing stand set in the corner of the room. Murky red potions sat in two of its three plates “...clean up.”

Tommy followed his gaze. “What the fuck is that?” he asked as Techno stood and made his way over to the brewing stand.

Techno sighed. “Well, I wasn’t just going to let you die.”

“And so you gave me *that* potion?” Tommy cried incredulously. “That- that *literally* looks like shit. What even is it?”

Techno shot him a half-hearted glare and didn’t miss the way it caused Tommy to wince back with a muttered apology.

Techno quashed the concern that rose at Tommy’s reaction, and instead allowed a reassuring smile to spread over his face. “It’s ok, Tommy. I know what it looks like, and didn’t end up giving it to you. I was just- I panicked. Making it was all I could think to do, but by the time I’d made it, you were already... well, you know.”

Tommy nodded slowly, his brow furrowing. “Yeah...” he said slowly. He inhaled, and seemed to be about to ask something, but then exhaled sharply and fell silent.

Techno picked the two potions off the brewing stand and scowled down at them. The effort he’d put into making them, the hope he’d allowed himself to feel as he’d brewed them, all of it had been for nothing. He stalked over to his window and tipped the potion out. It sizzled and steamed as it came into contact with the snow.

Definitely wouldn’t have been safe to drink.

Techno set aside the now-empty bottles and made his way back to Tommy, who was watching him warily. “Sorry,” Techno muttered.

Tommy smiled, a rather forced expression. “It’s okay,” he said, though there was still a fearful spark in his eyes.

Techno made an effort to relax and make his demeanour as calm and unthreatening as possible. “I’m not frustrated at you,” he said. “I’m frustrated at myself.”

Tommy nodded unsurely. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, of course.”

Techno sat heavily on the chair by Tommy’s bedside. “I’m...” he let out an uncertain little laugh, to try to alleviate some of the awkwardness that had settled over the cabin. “I’m just glad you’re ok.”

“Thanks, Techno.”

Techno let out a little huff of breath. “Yeah, it’s... it’s no problem.”

They sat in silence for a few moments before Techno stood again and walked over to one of his cabinets. Tommy's eyes tracked him as he first pulled out a woollen set of clothes, a fur cloak, thick gloves, and a sturdy pair of boots. Techno glanced down at the boots, sighed, and put one of them back in the cupboard.

Techno crossed the cabin again and dumped the clothes on the bedside table. He put the boot on the ground, so that it sat next to the wooden prosthetic that also lay there. "Here," he muttered. "Even with the fire, it gets cold."

Tommy blinked uncomprehendingly at the clothing, then glanced up at Techno. "Thank you," he said, a little disbelievingly.

Techno grunted noncommittally and turned back to the cabinet as Tommy reached for the clothes and began pulling them on.

He opened it again and, this time withdrew a whetstone.

Techno carried the stone to the table and set it down, before sitting behind it. He threw a glance at Tommy, who was watching him with a mixture of curiosity and wariness, and said, "I'm going to pull out a dagger. It's just so I can sharpen it."

Tommy's eyes widened fractionally, and he nodded quickly.

Techno, taking that as a go-ahead, unsheathed his weapon and began inspecting it for blemishes or chips. Enchanting daggers was always a pain, as the smaller vessel made it more difficult for magic to be contained within it. This meant that small weapons like them were used far less often in combat, as enchanting them with things like unbreaking and sharpness was far more difficult, and that resulted in them being less effective and requiring more maintenance. Techno, of course, still used daggers, because they were useful and if that meant sacrificing more of his time to taking care of it, then so be it.

He finished his examination with a sigh—there was a lot of work that needed to be done—angled the blade against the whetstone, and began dragging it back and forward. Soon, the cabin was filled with the grating scrape of metal against stone.

Techno often threw glances at Tommy, who lay on the mattress, watching him cautiously, remaining rather uncharacteristically quiet. Though there was still tension in the air of the room, it had settled down into something far milder than what it had been before. Now, the silence they sat in was more of a companionable one.

Techno's stomach churned as he was finally allowed a break, and the full weight of what he'd done settled on his bones.

He had used a totem on Tommy.

He had failed to properly treat him, and Tommy's soul had paid the price.

Techno grit his teeth and pushed the edge of the blade harder against the whetstone, the only outlet for the frustration and anger that rose unbidden.

He heard a slight rustling and glanced up to see that Tommy had stiffened and was watching Techno's hands, and the dagger he held in them, with wide, fearful eyes. Techno took a somewhat guilty breath and forced himself to relax, lessening the pressure on the stone and slowing his strokes back down.

He took note of the way some of the tension drained from Tommy's shoulders, and, from then, made sure to keep his strokes as calm as possible.

Internally, he was still fuming.

He had promised himself that he would heal Tommy, sworn to himself that the totem wouldn't have to be used, would just be a precaution.

But he had lied to himself.

He'd had to resort to a fucking totem of undying.

The voices pounded against the walls of his skull.

Techno cast another glance over to Tommy. His brother's gaze was lowered, now, his brow furrowed in concentration. After a few moments, he seemed to come to a decision. He raised his eyes, and they widened as they met Techno's crimson ones.

Techno raised an expectant eyebrow.

Tommy paused for a moment, then took a breath and launched into the question Techno could tell he'd been itching to ask. "That thing you made me hold, the, uh, 'precaution'... what was it?" he asked hesitantly. "Because I died, Techno. I-I'm on my last life, and I died. For a moment, I was actually, properly, *dead*. And then I woke up, and everything felt like it was... *clouded*. I couldn't focus on anything, my memories felt scattered and disorganised. I'd look at one thing and then forget it the next moment. It was... it just felt *wrong*. And then you gave me the milk, and it faded."

Techno's heart sank and he set aside his dagger with a sigh. As much as he hated it, he knew this had been coming since Tommy had awoken. "It's called a totem of undying," he said. "It's... well, it's pretty self-explanatory."

"So it gives you extra lives? How did you find it?"

"They're called evokers. You find them in woodland mansions. They drop totems."

Tommy paused for a moment, before he brightened, his eyes sparkling with a sudden realisation. "Wait, so... why don't we go kill more evokers, then? Sure, waking up didn't feel great, but we could practically become immortal!"

Techno shook his head emphatically. "No, No. Tommy, you can't. You *can't*. There's a reason I didn't tell you what the totem was, even after I gave it to you. There's a *reason* you felt that way when you woke up." The words came out faster than Techno usually spoke, with a frantic air so unlike his usual monotone. "Evokers—the process they go through to make their totems, it's... well, it's *vile*. They've spent years experimenting with spirits, working out

how to harness them and transform them into new lives for themselves. Totems, they leech away at your very *being*. If you thought you felt bad when you woke up,” Techno shuddered, “you don’t... you don’t want to use any more than one. You don’t want to use *one* to begin with. Trust me.”

Tommy was staring at Techno with wide eyes, driven speechless by his uncharacteristic forcefulness. “How do you know any of this?” he asked quietly. “Are you really sure? These totems, they’re-”

“I’m sure, Tommy,” Techno cut in. He clenched his jaw. “I’m sure, but you really don’t want to know how.”

“Techno, wait, you’re being unreasonable. You need to just consider it, at least. These are extra *lives* we’re talking about! We could literally save people! I’m on my last life, Phil’s only ever *had*-”

At the mention of their father’s name, Techno tensed, his expression contorting from one of worry to a frustrated scowl. “I said *no*, Tommy,” he snapped sharply. “You don’t know what you’re fucking talking about. You don’t- these totems are cursed. Their magic is cursed. You’ve used one, sure, but you don’t- you haven’t- You don’t know what they can *do*.”

Techno took in a deep, shuddering breath. The voices were loud. They were so, so loud. They did, after all, have a reason to be engendered by topic. Techno lowered his head to his hands, clenching his eyes shut, rubbing his temples, trying to make room for his own thoughts and emotions to be heard over the torrent of rage and frustration the voices created.

In doing so, he managed to miss the way his brother flinched back, his face paling, his eyes widening in horror. “Sorry,” Tommy muttered. “Sorry, Techno. I won’t- I won’t bring it up again. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Techno hissed out a breath through clenched teeth. He stood sharply, sending his chair skittering back across the floor. Tommy pressed himself further back into the mattress, his breath catching in his throat.

Techno shook his head, as though trying to dislodge something. “Shut up,” he forced through gritted teeth, stalking across the room, his hands still raised to his temples. Tommy stared after him with huge eyes.

“Shut *up*,” Techno repeated, louder this time. He lifted a hand and tore the door open, stepping out into the tundra beyond. The last thing Tommy saw was his hand curling around the sword at his hip, unsheathing the wickedly sharp netherite blade, before the door slammed shut and he was left in the now-empty room.

Tommy’s breaths came in panicked, shuddering gasps.

Techno was angry at him. Techno was *furious* at him.

He’d fucked up. He’d fucked up so badly.

Oh god.

Oh no.

Tommy pushed himself up from the bed, glancing around the room frantically until his eyes landed on the prosthetic that lay by the bedside table. He leaned over and snatched it from the ground, bringing it to his leg and securing it quickly, incorrectly, in a few seconds, before slipping his left foot into the boot.

He didn't know what he'd done. He didn't know why Techno had gotten so worked up over the topic of the totems. He'd thought that they could be helpful, an upper hand over their enemies, a safety measure that could render death essentially meaningless. He should have dropped the topic as soon as Techno had begun to get angry. He hadn't, though, and now Techno was gone.

Tommy's eyes widened.

What if Techno had gone to get Dream?

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Tommy nearly overbalanced in his haste to push himself off the bed. He staggered across the room on shaking legs, only barely keeping upright on his prosthetic, his panic and adrenaline the only things keeping him going.

He had to get out.

Where could he go?

Tommy took a few gasping breaths before he reached out to the door handle, but he hesitated before he opened it.

He didn't *want* to leave.

Techno was his brother. More than that, Techno had been *kind* to him. But... but so had Dream, during those long, lonely nights when Tommy had cried into his shoulder about how alone he was, about how everyone had left him. So had Dream, when he had whispered reassurances about how he was there, how he would always be there, how he was Tommy's only friend.

Techno had given him food and shelter. But so had Dream, when he had supplied some of the materials Tommy needed to build Logstedshire. So had Dream, when he had brought scraps of food as 'treats' for Tommy's good behaviour.

Techno had given him warm, clean clothes. But so had Dream, when he had brought armour and tools to help Tommy with his endeavours. So had Dream, before he had forced Tommy to drop them into the pit that he'd blown up in his face.

There was a part of Tommy that whispered that his reasoning was flawed, that Techno had done so much more for him—that he had offered up magic and time and effort into caring for

him, and that he wouldn't do that if he didn't truly care.

But Tommy knew he was lying to himself. He knew he couldn't stay.

Even if Techno wasn't already planning to pull what Dream had, Tommy knew that his kindness wouldn't remain. He was a burden, a bother, and if he remained then he'd undoubtedly end up pissing his brother off, annoying him to the point where he'd kill him or, worse, sell him out to Dream.

So Tommy grit his teeth and pulled open the door. He was instantly blasted by a wave of freezing air, but the clothing Techno had bundled him in (that he planned on eventually taking away) did wonders in staving off the chill.

Memories of hours spent trudging through the snow in nothing but pants and a thin shirt, of a foot freezing off and an arrow tearing through his shoulder, of hopelessness and despair and the tiny speck of light that lay in the compass around his neck, threatened to rise.

Tommy pushed them aside.

There were fresh footprints in the snow layered on the porch and surrounding the house, but Techno was nowhere in sight.

Tommy let out a relieved breath.

He cast one longing glance back at the warm interior of the cabin and then shut the door behind him. "You'll be fine," he muttered to himself.

He turned back around, and nearly leapt out of his skin. There was a horse standing in front of him.

Tommy stared at it in shock. It was the same one he'd encountered the day he'd arrived at Techno's cabin, the one that had saved his life and pushed him to go inside the house.

The horse let out a breathy, exasperated whicker.

"Shh," Tommy shushed it quickly, glancing around nervously for a sign of his brother. "I'm leaving now. You can't stop me."

The horse snorted and tossed its head, as though in protest.

Tommy ignored it and stumbled across the porch, clinging tightly to the rail to keep himself upright. The horse trailed after him. He got to the edge of the rail, took a trembling, unsure step forward, and nearly overbalanced. His arms windmilled out to the side and caught on the animal's neck, which ended up being the only thing that stopped him from faceplanting.

The horse stomped its feet, snorting again.

Tommy groaned, refusing to consider the fact that, without its help, he would currently be lying in the snow. "What the fuck do you want?"

The horse lowered its head and nudged him forward.

“Whoa!” Tommy exclaimed, clutching desperately onto its mane as his prosthetic leg threatened to give in. “Where are you going?”

The horse let out an annoyed whinny and shoved its head into his side again.

“Fucking hell!” Tommy yelped. “I’ll go! Fine, I’ll go! Where- where are you taking me?”

The horse, of course, did not answer the question, and it was all Tommy could do to keep a tight grip on its coat as it led him around the side of the house. As they moved, he began to register the sound of repeated, rhythmic pounding, followed shortly by grunts of anger and exertion.

“Wait, what are you-”

The colour drained from Tommy’s face as they rounded the corner and Techno came into view, standing in front of a tree, his sword drawn. He was slashing at it with wide, powerful strikes, leaving wide, deep gouges in its bark. His face was set in a mask of fury and wrath, and Tommy could see that his mouth was moving but couldn’t make out the words he was saying.

“Fuck no,” Tommy said, pushing away from the horse and staggering away from his enraged brother. “Are you *trying* to get me killed? I’m not going to-”

The horse interrupted him with a loud neigh, and Tommy somehow managed to pale even further.

Techno turned from the tree, his eyes widening as he saw the horse standing there. Tommy was blocked from his view, but that wasn’t going to remain the case for long.

“Carl?” Techno asked through heaving breaths. He lowered his sword and began making his way over to the horse and, though he didn’t know it, his brother who was crouched behind. “What are you-”

Techno froze as he saw Tommy. His grip around his sword loosened momentarily before it tightened again so he could sheathe the blade.

“Oh,” he said.

Tommy cringed away from him. “Wait, wait, please. I’m going, Techno. I promise, I’m going. I’m only here because your damn horse made me come. But I don’t- I’m sorry for talking about the totem. I didn’t know what I was doing. I’m sorry.”

“Tommy, what are you talking about?” Techno asked confusedly, taking a step towards him, staring at him with a hard gaze.

Tommy took a few shuffling steps back, his pulse quickening. “Please don’t get Dream. Please don’t go get Dream. I’m going away, and you won’t ever see me again. I’m going-”

He cut himself off with a cry as his foot caught on a buried rock and he began toppling backwards. Techno lunged forward and caught onto his shoulder, saving him in the nick of time. Even through his many layers of clothing, he could feel that Tommy was shaking.

“Tommy, calm down. You’re ok.”

“I’m- what do you mean?”

Something in Techno’s eyes softened, guilt and understanding shining through. “I’m not angry at you, Tommy.”

“You’re not- what do you mean?” Tommy asked again, his mind refusing to comprehend what it was hearing.

Carl whickered softly, butting his head into Techno’s back. Techno staggered forward and had to readjust his grip on Tommy’s shoulder until he was holding him in an awkward sort of half-embrace.

He shot his horse a glare. Carl stared back at him with innocent eyes.

Tommy, who had tensed at the sudden movement, began to relax into Techno’s hold. “Are you really not mad?” he muttered.

“No, Tommy. Of course not. I’m sorry... I’m sorry it happened at all.”

“Oh. That’s good, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Techno said. “Yeah, of course. It’s good. You’re good. Tommy, what the hell did you think I was going to do to you?”

“Kill me,” Tommy said instantly, then his voice quietened and he continued with, “Or, uh, or sell me out to...” he swallowed heavily before finishing with a whispered, “to Dream.”

The way Tommy spoke of his own death so unflinchingly, but fell quiet at the mention of Dream... it painted a rather grisly picture, and answered a question Techno had been wanting to ask for days.

Dream had done this.

Dream had done this to his brother.

God, it was so obvious. Of course it would be Dream. Techno grit his teeth and ruthlessly stamped down on the rage that threatened to rise at that revelation, telling the voices, in no uncertain terms, to fuck right off. He couldn’t deal with them, not now, not when Tommy still needed him.

Carl stomped his foot impatiently, and Techno shot him another glance, this one questioning.

The horse, as soon as Techno met his gaze, jerked his head emphatically towards the cabin.

Techno huffed a breath. “Yeah, ok,” he murmured to the horse, keeping his voice low enough that Tommy wouldn’t hear. And then, to his brother, he said, with all the conviction and sincerity he could muster, “I would *never* do that. I swear to you, Tommy. I will never hurt you. I will never let Dream near you. The only time you’ll have to leave the cabin is when you want to. Until then, you can stay for as long as you want. I promise.”

“That’s... that’s good. Thank you.”

As Techno stared down at his brother, he felt grief well in his heart. This, the way he was acting, was so unlike anything he’d seen before. This wasn’t how Tommy should have to act. The shadows in his eyes and heart, the mental and physical scars he bore, weren’t things he should ever have needed to carry. What he’d gone through wasn’t something any kid, let alone his little brother, should have to go through.

“Hey,” he said gently. “Let’s go inside. Let’s get you to lie down.”

“Yeah. That sounds nice.”

Techno leaned down and scooped one of his arms behind Tommy’s knees and then, in one fluid movement, lifted him off the ground.

Tommy tensed slightly but quickly relaxed as Techno muttered a few reassuring nothings.

Carl let out a snort of approval as Techno started back towards the cabin. He trotted after them, only separating when they reached the porch and he instead settled into his still-ruined pen.

Techno still needed to fix that.

He pushed open the door and carried Tommy back inside, only allowing himself to breathe once his brother was once again set down on the bed. Techno stepped back and clenched his eyes shut.

The voices had calmed slightly but they were still there, still loud. His use of potions over the past few days had dispelled some of the relaxed, almost *friendly* air they’d taken on during his retirement, and he’d grown complacent in their calmness which meant he’d lost much of his ability to control them.

That was what had led to his breakdown.

The only reason he’d been able to stop a second one, when he’d realised Dream was behind this all, was due to his worry and concern for his brother.

He didn’t know how well he’d be able to hold them back if it happened again.

Techno took in a deep breath.

For now, he needed to get Tommy something to eat. While the totem had helped—slightly filled the hollows of his cheeks, somewhat combated the emaciation of the rest of his body—and meant that Techno wouldn’t need to be as cautious while easing him back into eating

food, there was only so much its magic could do. After all, Tommy hadn't eaten anything substantial in weeks. Now that his pneumonia had let up, he would finally realise how hungry he was.

That, at least, was something Techno could do something about.

Chapter End Notes

Istg, Carl is the only thing keeping this family together

KURO DREW SOME EPIC [FANART](#) FOR THIS CHAPTER, OF WHEN TECHNO TURNED FROM THE TREE TO SEE CARL!!

AND WE'VE GOT SOME [MORE](#) BY LEMONBISCUITS, OF TECHNO SEEING TOMMY!!

HERE'S [ANOTHER](#) BY METEORBLUEJAY, OF TECHNO CARRYING TOMMY BACK INSIDE!!!

tangled in threads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil marvelled at his newly freed wings. He flexed the muscles slowly, gritting his teeth against the cramping pain that spiked through them but revelling in the feeling of sheer *freedom* that came from the action.

His mood was dampened slightly as he began to spread his wings and found that the cell was far too small to allow a wide range of movement.

“Uh, Phil?” came Tubbo’s nervous voice, breaking him from his wonder. Phil turned his head to see the boy standing at the back of the cell, his exit blocked by the wings that were brushing against both of the rough stone walls. “Do you think you could maybe... let me out?”

Phil stared at Tubbo for a long moment, his eyes flickering down to the key still clutched in his hand.

Tubbo swallowed visibly, drawing the key close to his chest and taking a few scuttling steps backwards. “Y-you said you wouldn’t hurt me.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed. His mind was racing, full of thoughts, plans and possibilities that chased each other around, rapidly testing and proving and disproving themselves. He could keep his word, be compliant and remain here, alive, with his wings freed but ultimately just as much of a prisoner as he had been before. Even with his wings unbound, the idea of staying in this tiny, dirty little cell was... unappealing, to say the least. He could sway Tubbo further to his side, convince him to help with an escape attempt, but that could go wrong and would likely require him to manipulate and lie to the boy. He could take Tubbo hostage again, use him as leverage to get out of L’Manberg, but lose all the trust he’d built and risk something going wrong and possibly leaving him dead. He could knock Tubbo out and make a break for it, but that would also break their trust, and the chance of successfully pulling it off was even slimmer.

Phil clenched his jaw. He had promised Tubbo he wouldn’t attack him, and the kid had believed him. He had trusted him. Phil could not, in any good faith, go back on his word like that. Not with all he knew Tubbo was already going through.

And so, after those few tense moments of deliberation, he eventually folded one of his wings back. Tubbo’s entire posture relaxed and he crept forward, watching Phil warily as he passed, and then fully calming once he stood between the metal bars of the cell and the prisoner they contained.

He turned and, with one last glance back at Phil, unlocked the door and stepped outside.

“Thank you,” Tubbo said carefully after he was out and Phil had still made no move to stop him.

“I owed *that* much to you,” Phil said with a shrug, stamping down the bitter regret that threatened to rise as Tubbo once again latched the door shut and locked him inside. He walked over to the very side of the cell and then, while facing the wall, began to stretch his wings back all the way. In the confines of the cell, there was no way he could spread them both to the side—his wingspan was far too large—but by extending them backwards he was able to somewhat work around that restriction.

“Thanks, Tubbo,” Phil said finally, quietly, after stretching the muscles of his wings for a few moments.

Tubbo, who had been staring up at Phil’s wings with a mix of wonder at the sight of them and guilt at the state of them, looked down and met Phil’s eyes again. “You’re welcome,” he said. “I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. For how I acted. Doing this was more than enough. Thank you.”

Tubbo sighed, rubbing the back of his head. “It’s... it’s okay. I just- I wish things were different.”

Phil folded his left wing, turned, and stretched his right wing out to the side. “Don’t we all,” he said with a rueful smile as he craned his head to properly examine the wing.

Phil raised a hand to touch the feathers and flinched back just as quickly. He had been so enhanced by his newfound freedom that he’d managed to momentarily forget the state his wings were in. The feathers were gritty and foul to the touch, and the very feel of them sent a shudder of revulsion down his spine. Now that they had been disturbed, their itchiness, something he’d grown to ignore over the past five days, came back in a crash and the stems of the displaced and bent feathers began to itch with a burning fervour.

Phil grit his teeth and raked a hand through the greasy feathers, trying to get a feel for how many of them would be salvageable. About a dozen of them fell out and settled sadly to the floor. Phil stared silently down at them.

This was disgusting.

This was *shameful*.

“Is there anything that can help?” Tubbo asked quietly.

A cell as cramped and dirty as this one was not ideal for preening, and alone Phil would be unable to reach everywhere he needed. But letting him out wasn’t something Tubbo could do, and Techno was the only person with whom Phil was still close enough to allow to help him preen. So Phil shook his head, brought up a hand to run it down his wing again, and said, “Not really. Not here. I’ll be fine.”

Tubbo nodded unsurely.

A few more minutes passed, silence interspaced with idle conversation, before Tubbo said, “I don’t think I can stay.”

Phil glanced up from his wing.

“I’ve been here for a while. Quackity... doesn’t like it when I do that.” Tubbo winced, his voice quietening. “And I’m gonna have to tell him that I took off the clamps.”

“Right,” Phil said. “Don’t let him treat you too badly, yeah? You’re the president, not him. Remember that.”

Tubbo hesitated momentarily before he nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Of course.”

Phil watched with a heavy heart as Tubbo turned and made his way down the corridor.

He was pushing for the boy to stand up for himself more, to use the power he should, by all rights, already have from his position. But he knew it wasn’t working, not really. He wished he could do more.

Phil scowled down at his hands, which were gritty with the dirt from his feathers.

He knew that, from his current position, he couldn’t.

Phil heaved a sigh and turned back to his wing, returning to his cleaning.

Maybe things would change. Maybe they wouldn’t.

Maybe he’d be able to help Tubbo more. Maybe he wouldn’t.

There was nothing to do but try.

-0-

By the time Tubbo returned, late the next day, Phil’s had properly stretched out the muscles of his wings, they were far cleaner than they had been in several days, and the majority of his displaced feathers had been straightened and returned to their proper place. There were still areas of his wings that would require the help of another person to preen, but overall he was feeling rather content.

Tubbo, however, was not.

The president crossed the corridor with slow, trudging steps, looking more downtrodden than Phil had ever seen him. His shoulders were slumped, his eyes downcast, his fingers trembling. He only raised his eyes to meet Phil’s once he stood right outside the cell.

Now that Phil’s wings were unclamped, he could move around the cell unhindered by the chains that had been hooked to the walls. Because of this, he was able to stand right by the bars—something he had taken full advantage of as soon as he’d seen Tubbo’s state. They now stood within an arm’s length of each other, and in that moment Phil longed to do nothing more than pull him into a comforting embrace and grant him the break he sorely needed.

The metal bars that stood between them, however, meant that would be impossible to achieve. So instead, Phil offered the only support he could. He spoke, his voice full of concern, over Tubbo's wellbeing, and fear, over whatever must have happened, "Tubbo? Are you okay? Did Quackity... do something?"

Tubbo shook his head. "He... he wasn't happy. But he didn't..." he fell silent for a moment before whispering, "Dream's in L'Manberg."

Phil's heart sunk.

Phil's experiences with Dream stretched far back, and their relationship had always been a distant but hostile one. Before the man had manipulated Tubbo into exiling Tommy, before he had supported and encouraged Wilbur's maniac desire to destroy L'Manberg, even before he had waged war on the nation his sons had been trying to build, they had been at odds with each other.

Years had passed, and countless more would pass, but Phil would never forget what Dream and Techno had done. What they'd tried to achieve before he'd managed to sway his son back to his side, before he'd managed to get him to realise the horror of his actions.

He remembered the souls the two had experimented with and destroyed in their fruitless quest for immortality. Techno had stopped. Techno had told him that Dream had too. Phil didn't know if it was true.

Techno had forgiven Dream. Phil never had.

Phil shuddered to think of what Dream was planning. He couldn't allow his misgivings to show, though. It would only make Tubbo feel even worse, even more scared, than he already did. So instead, Phil gently asked, "What's he done?"

Tubbo shook his head. "Nothing yet. I just..." his eyes darted to the right for a moment, before flickering back to Phil. "I don't know what he wants. He's- you know that list I told you about?"

Phil nodded slowly, realisation dawning in his eyes. "He's on it." It wasn't a question.

Tubbo bowed his head. "Yeah," he whispered. "But he's *Dream*. I wouldn't even know how the hell Quackity planned on going about killing him, except that he doesn't even seem to want to."

Phil cocked his head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"I don't... I don't even know, Phil. Quackity and Dream spent all of today discussing things together, privately. I don't know what Quackity thinks he's doing, because Dream's on our hit list and yet he's refusing to tell me what he's planning, and no one else is telling me anything either, and I just *don't know* what's going on anymore!" Tubbo took a shuddering breath, his head dropping into his hands. His next words came out as a whisper, "I just don't know what to do."

Phil's mind was racing. An answer was beginning to form, an answer to a question he'd had since the beginning of his imprisonment, an answer that filled in far less blank spaces than it made. It made sense, but brought rise to ten times the questions it solved.

Tubbo would be able to confirm it, but now wasn't the time to ask. For now, he said, "Do you have no one else you can go to? Fundy?" The name of his treacherous grandson felt sour on his tongue, but surely the fox would be willing to help Tubbo. "Can Fundy help you?"

Tubbo shook his head with a bitter little laugh. "All Fundy wants is validation. Validation from someone he looks up to. I'm... well, I'm certainly not that."

The '*but Quackity is,*' was left unsaid, but still rang loudly in the silence that followed Tubbo's words. Phil shut his eyes and only barely withheld a groan. "What about Ranboo? I don't know him well, but he seems... nice enough."

"I suppose..." Tubbo said hesitantly. "He listens to me. He's the *only* one that ever listens to me, other than you. But I just- he's got secrets too. Everyone's hiding things. I just don't know who I can trust, Phil." Tubbo let out a huff of air. "Hell, I don't know why I trust *you* so much."

"You're the only one that visits me, Tubbo. There's no one I *could* spill your secrets to."

"Ah. Yeah."

"Yeah."

Tubbo's eyes darted around the room uncomfortably. He shifted back and forward, opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it again. Phil didn't fill the silence, instead waiting for him to speak of what was so obviously on his mind.

"I lied," Tubbo eventually blurted.

Phil raised an eyebrow.

"I think I know what's going on. Or at least, part of it." Tubbo took a shaky breath. "I shouldn't be telling you this," he muttered, mostly to himself.

Once again, Phil didn't speak. Often the best way to get people to talk was to remain quiet. Truth tended to fill silence.

"Dream's the one that told us of your involvement with Techno," Tubbo said eventually, refusing to meet Phil's eyes. "He told us you were a hybrid, gave us..." he nodded towards the clamps that lay, discarded, in the corner of the cell, "...those."

Phil let out a sharp breath. He had wondered if that could be the case, but it didn't make sense.

If Dream had told the Butcher Army of Phil's involvement with Techno, then he must be on their side, supporting their endeavour to hunt him down. Which would make sense, if not for the fact that Phil knew for a *fact* that the man knew where Techno's cabin was.

He and Techno had encountered Dream in the cabin, just after they'd finished building it. Phil's wings had been extended, stretched out freely, the silver feathers shining with a glossy purple sheen. He was in the main room, sitting at a table, a mug of tea in his hands. Techno was, or at least had been, outside, caring for the turtle farm he'd decided to set up.

The door had slammed open and Techno burst in, his eyes wide, his breaths coming in sharp huffs. "Hide your wings," he hissed before Phil had a chance to react, throwing a quick glance over his shoulder. "Quickly!"

Phil hastened to tuck his wings away. He barely managed it before Dream came into view, strolling, uninvited, past Techno and into the cabin. His head was cocked, staring directly at Phil. Even through his expressionless porcelain mask, Phil could feel the intensity of his gaze. After a long, strained silence, Dream tore his gaze away from Phil, glanced around the cabin and said, voice thick with faux casualness, "Nice place you've got here."

Techno had scowled, stomping forward and shoving himself between Dream and Phil. He had, bluntly, asked the man what he planned to do with the knowledge of the cabin's location. Dream had laughed dismissively and promised to keep it a secret.

By informing the Butcher Army of Phil's knowledge, he had not technically broken his word.

But... if Dream wanted them to hunt down Techno, he needn't have bothered with making Phil a middle man. He could have just outright told them where the cabin was. Maybe it was some twisted sense of morality, a desire to keep his promise in technicality, not intent, and ensure that he remained true to his word. But from what Phil knew of Dream, that was... more than unlikely.

Dream had a plan of his own.

But, god, he couldn't let Tubbo know just how many strings Dream was pulling. That would raise too many questions and would force him to tell the boy that Dream knew of the location of Techno's cabin, and no matter how much he liked the kid, he couldn't afford to hand him information like that. Tubbo would go and confront the man about it, get himself tangled even further in the situation, become a larger focus of Dream's attention.

So Phil dragged an expression of wide-eyed surprise onto his face and whispered a shocked little, "What?"

Tubbo nodded. "He visited L'Manberg a couple of weeks ago, I think. It was just after the, uh, the hit list had been made. A few days after he arrived he asked to meet with us. Quackity said we should try and kill him then, and I tried to talk him down, but ultimately it was Fundy that managed to stop him. That was when Dream told us."

"And you broke into my house a few days later?"

Tubbo winced but nodded again. "Yeah. I... I actually barely managed to stop them from just imprisoning you off the bat. But then... well, we both know how well that went."

Phil snorted slightly. "Yeah," he said wryly, even as his mind continued to race with this new information.

He knew so little about what was truly happening. Tubbo visited him, sure, and shared what he could, but even without accounting for the boy's warped perception of what was going on around him, Phil knew that he was withholding information. It wasn't something he resented him for, of course. Given the circumstance, it was only to be expected. But it still set him on edge.

And Tubbo, in confirming that Dream was the man behind his imprisonment, had proved that the scope of this was far wider than he'd considered. If knowledge was power, then he had never been more powerless.

But he couldn't let it show. Phil had managed to become a sort of pillar for Tubbo, and at a time like this, he needed to act like it. So he said, with all the sincerity he could muster, "Thank you for telling me this, Tubbo."

A small, sad smile flickered over Tubbo's face. "Yeah, yeah it's... it's no problem. Thank you for... well, just, thank you."

They lapsed into a grim silence that Tubbo broke. He cast a quick glance at his watch, then down the hall, then turned to Phil with an apology in his expression. "Dream said he wanted to meet with me. I need to go."

Phil's wings drooped. He said, "Stand up straight. Remember that you're the president, not them."

Tubbo nodded, his eyes downcast. "Yeah."

He trudged down the corridor, pulled open the heavy door, and Phil was left with nothing but the company of the torches' crackling flames.

Chapter End Notes

3/3/22: okay so i'm going over the previous chapters and... head in hands, this one really just held out a steaming plate of telling and said "here you go"

SOME [FANART](#) BY KURO OF PHIL PREENING HIS WINGS!! GO CHECK IT OUT AND GIVE THEM SOME LOVE!!

a losing battle is raging

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil was terrified of the state Tubbo would be in when he returned the next day.

He refused to consider the possibility of the boy not returning.

His worry led to an inability to sit still. His stomach churned, his wings flexed and rustled restlessly, and the only real way he found he was able to rid some of his anxiety was by moving. He paced his cell over and over, glaring down at his feet, tugging pointlessly at the detached metal cuffs that were still wrapped around his wrists, that still hadn't been removed.

Phil had no way to track time, but he was sure that hours must have passed before he eventually collapsed against the wall of his cell and sunk down to the rocky ground. His wings curled around himself instinctively, providing a feathery layer of warmth, and, though he still felt sick from his apprehension, he found himself slipping into an uneasy sleep.

The only time he was sleeping these days was when he was too tired to do anything else.

The next morning came, and the hours after he awoke dragged on agonisingly slowly.

Phil was on his feet, hovering by the bars of the cell, as soon as he heard the prison door clang open. His feathers were flared with unease, and he listened impatiently as Tubbo's footsteps drew near.

The boy's pace was different from what it had been the day before, different from what Phil had expected to hear. When he'd walked down the corridor yesterday, his despondency had been audible in the slowness of his footfalls and the scrape of his boots dragging against the ground. This time, however, his footsteps were light and quick and seemed almost joyful in comparison.

When Tubbo came into view, Phil was surprised to see that there was a slight smile playing across his lips. "Are you okay?" he asked frantically, his hands clutching at the iron bars.

Tubbo nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine, Phil. Don't worry."

At the spoken confirmation of what Tubbo's demeanour had already suggested, Phil's breath came out in one sharp, relieved huff. His shoulders slumped, the tension and stress draining from his wings and back in an instinctive, immediate response to hearing that Tubbo was unharmed.

"What happened? What did Dream want? Why did he meet with you?"

"He wanted to formally recognise L'Manberg as an independent nation," Tubbo said, slight incredulity lining his tone. "Since I uh, exiled Tommy, he's sort of implied it, with his actions. But now it's official. I... well, I'm not quite sure what I expected. Not *this*."

“But he did nothing...” Phil struggled for the right word for a moment, before settling on, “bad? Nothing at all?”

Tubbo shook his head. “Dream’s not done anything in weeks. Since... well, y’know. Since Tommy. I don’t know why I expected any different now.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed as the initial wave of relief began to ebb. “And he doesn’t want anything in return?”

Tubbo shook his head. “I mean, he’s asked to stay in L’Manberg for a while, but that’s it. He says he wanted to see what we’ve done, what we’re doing, now that we’re not at war with the SMP anymore.”

Phil nodded slowly, consideringly. “And how did other people respond?”

“It was just me, Dream and Quackity. And Quackity supported it, so... I guess it’s fine?”

“Do you know what they spoke about, before your meeting?”

Tubbo shook his head. “No. Neither of them brought it up, so I didn’t ask. It... might have been about Technoblade, though. It’s all I can really think of.”

Phil regarded him silently, worriedly, considering what he knew.

Tubbo took his silence as an invitation to continue speaking. “I don’t know why they’d talk about it without me, though. It was just those two—Fundy and Ranboo also weren’t there. Even though them talking about Technoblade is all that would really make sense, I don’t get why they’d do it alone.”

Phil blinked at him, then his eyes dropped down to his hands. He had a suspicion.

What had Tubbo said to him, all those nights ago?

“Quackity says we should force you to tell us where Technoblade’s house is.”

Phil swallowed back the bile that threatened to rise.

He couldn’t tell Tubbo.

If Tubbo knew, he would almost certainly leap up do something reckless to try to protect Phil. The moment Tubbo stopped acting as the figurehead Phil knew Quackity was using him as, the moment he became too independent to exert control over, was the moment he stopped being useful to him. And for Quackity, true presidency was just one slice of a dagger, one poisoned plate of food, out of his reach.

Tubbo *couldn’t* know.

So Phil plastered a reassuring smile over his face and said, “I’m sure it’s fine. Maybe they weren’t even discussing Techno—maybe Quackity was just making sure Dream had good intentions.”

Tubbo nodded slowly. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, that would make sense.”

Phil dropped his head, clenched his eyes shut and took a deep, shuddering breath. “Yeah,” he muttered, too quietly for Tubbo to hear. “It all makes sense.”

Tubbo, ignorant—perhaps willfully—of Phil’s turbulent emotions, spoke again, “But wait, Phil, do you wanna know what else happened today?”

Phil clamped down harshly on his fear and raised his head. “Mmm?”

Tubbo launched into his story, rattling off all the details of his day, explaining how he’d started construction on a new house and collected some resources and all the hundreds of other little things he’d done. Phil listened with a smile, nodding along, laughing where appropriate, interrupting with his own stories where he thought they’d fit.

His heart was heavy with dread.

-o-

“Dream and I spent the day together,” Tubbo said, the next time he visited Phil. “Quackity said I should show him around L’Manberg, so I did, and from there we just sort of... hung out.”

Phil crossed his arms. “You spent the day with Dream? Did he do anything to you?”

Tubbo shook his head with a small smile. “I’m okay, Phil. It was actually kinda nice. Really, I don’t think Dream’s all that bad.”

Phil’s stomach churned. “He’s not that bad. Uh-huh.”

“What’s wrong?” Tubbo asked, his smile dropping as he picked up on the hybrid’s discomfort.

Phil allowed his arms to drop to his sides, and he took a step towards the bars of his cell. He hadn’t gotten a proper rest since he’d been thrown in this godforsaken prison, he was tired and scared and tired of being scared, and he had been hiding the true gravity of the situation from Tubbo for days, bottling up his emotions and not allowing any of his true dread to shine through. Tubbo couldn’t know, he *couldn’t*, because if he did then he’d almost certainly act recklessly and Phil shuddered to think of what would happen to him then.

But now the president was standing here, had the audacity to say that Dream, that *Dream*, was nice, that he wasn’t so bad, and Phil just couldn’t hold it back. He snapped, “Tubbo, are you hearing yourself? Dream’s not that bad? *Dream*?” He twisted sharply away from the president, his wings flared out, the feathers ruffling with discontent. “You’re talking about the man that forced you to exile Tommy. You’re talking about the man that drove Wilbur to blow up L’Manberg. You’re talking about the *tyrant* that’s been suppressing your nation since its birth! This is fucking *Dream* you’re talking about!”

“But all that was in the past. Maybe he’s changed,” Tubbo said quietly. “You say Technoblade did, so why can’t Dream?”

“Tubbo, you don’t—” Phil’s hands tightened into fists. He took a deep breath, turning back to look at the president with a gaze that held all the worry and sincerity he felt. “Trust me, Tubbo. I didn’t think I’d have to spell it out for you but... you can’t trust Dream. You *cannot* trust Dream.”

Tubbo took a step back, wringing his hands. “Phil you’ve said that a lot. About Quackity, too. The reason I was so scared of Dream’s arrival was because you’ve...you’ve made me think that people around me can’t be trusted. But I don’t know if it’s true.”

Phil clenched his jaw. He was being too forward, too forceful. He was in no position to assert any sort of control over Tubbo, over his actions. There was a reason he’d never outright said something like this, a reason he’d tried to be subtle with his pushes for Tubbo to get out from under Quackity’s control. The minute he overstepped his boundaries would be the minute the boy stopped visiting him, the moment he lost any chance at helping him. And right now, his panic and fear were making him toe that line.

So Phil shut his eyes, bowed his head, took a breath, and forced his desperation to drain away as he exhaled. Dream was in L’Manberg, but it seemed he was going to play a long game. Phil could do that too.

So Phil raised his head and held his hands out in surrender. “You’re right,” he said, and the words grated against his tongue. “I’m sorry.”

Tubbo stared at him for a long moment before his hands dropped to his sides and he let out a sigh. “I’m sorry too,” he muttered. “This meeting with Dream was just... I don’t know. It was nice. It was so different to everything else that’s been happening recently. I think... I *really* think he might not be that bad, Phil.”

Phil bit back the scathing remark that clawed at his throat and instead allowed a small smile to cross over his face. “I guess you’re right. I’m happy for you, Tubbo,” he said. The lie tasted bitter.

Tubbo, always willing to forgive, never one to hold a grudge, smiled back at him. They slipped into another conversation. Neither of them touched on the argument they’d just had.

Phil couldn’t believe he was doing this.

-0-

As the week progressed, so too did Tubbo’s faith in Dream and Phil’s hatred of the same man.

Tubbo had, on his fourth visit after Dream’s arrival in L’Manberg, admitted that perhaps he had been a little too quick to trust him. Phil had almost allowed himself to relax, to believe that his work was paying off, when Tubbo had followed his statement by saying that Dream had, however, continued with his kindness and now more-than-deserved his trust.

When Phil had asked him to elaborate, the deeds that Tubbo had listed had been worryingly simple.

“He listens to me,” Tubbo had said. “He supports my decisions. He respects my power as president. He cares about L’Manberg and its people. He cares about *me*. Phil, I promise, you can trust him.”

Phil had nearly screamed. The fact that *that* was all someone needed to do in order for Tubbo to trust them, the fact that his standards were set so low, spoke at length of how little the boy had been offered.

The fact that it was all *he* had done to gain Tubbo's trust also wasn't lost on Phil.

God, he must seem like the world's biggest hypocrite.

He was right about Dream, though. He *knew* he was right about Dream.

But all his efforts to prove it to Tubbo were futile.

-0-

“I’m not going to be coming here tomorrow,” is what Tubbo started their next conversation with.

Phil arched an eyebrow curiously. “Oh?”

Tubbo nodded. “Dream said I should go to Logstedshire. He told me that Tommy missed me, wanted to see me.”

Phil stifled scowl at the mention of Dream, nodding along to Tubbo's words. “I’ve been telling you to visit him.” And it was true. He had, numerous times, encouraged Tubbo to visit Tommy in exile, but each time his suggestion had been shot down by Tubbo’s reluctance to face his friend, his worry over how Tommy would react to seeing him. Phil continued, his tone light, “Should I feel betrayed that you’d only consider it after Dream told you to?”

Tubbo sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “I know, I’m sorry. But I just— Dream’s the only one that’s seen Tommy in so long. You know this. I wasn’t sure if Tommy would actually want to see me... but now that Dream’s said he does, I know for sure! Do you think he’ll be angry at me for taking so long...?”

“Well, you know how Tommy is. He’s gonna feel betrayed, probably. And he’ll be stubborn about letting you know that.” There was no point in Phil telling Tubbo that he should have visited Tommy sooner—the petty ‘I told you so’ would get him nowhere. So instead, he said, “You’re gonna have to apologise for waiting this long, though. Bring him a present or something.”

“Yeah I was going to, but I’m not really sure what to get... do you have any ideas?”

Phil considered him for a moment before his eyes widened in realisation. He took a moment to count off the days he remembered being here, before giving up and asking, “Wait, what’s the date?”

A small smile spread across Tubbo’s face. “December 22nd.”

“It’s... is it your birthday tomorrow?”

Tubbo’s grin widened. “I wasn’t sure if you were gonna remember! I’m so glad you did.”

A tiny drop of bitterness rose at Tubbo’s words. He hadn’t been sure if Phil was going to remember? What, had he *expected* Phil to remember? For all his consideration, the boy hadn’t thought to bring him any sort of clock or calendar, or anything that might have helped him keep track of the hours and days that passed. Nor, for that matter, had he brought anything else to combat the monotony of what his life had become.

But Phil let none of that show and said, “Oh, happy birthday, Tubbo! You’re turning 17, right?”

Tubbo nodded eagerly. “Yeah! Thank you! It’s why I chose tomorrow of all days. I’m gonna celebrate with Tommy! I’ve baked a cake for us to share, but I’m not sure what else I could bring.”

Phil shrugged. “It’s a gift from you, not from me. You’ve probably thought of a music disc, though—I’m sure that’s something he’d like. But other than that, uh, maybe you can bring him some resources? It’s simple, but he’d probably appreciate that, what with... being away and all.”

Tubbo considered the ideas for a moment before he nodded. “Yeah, those sound good!”

“Now, you can’t keep Tommy waiting. He’s gonna be so happy to see you.”

“Of course!” When Tubbo started down the corridor, there was a spring in his step. He pulled the prison door open. “Thanks, Phil!”

Phil’s eyes slid shut and he allowed his cheerful facade to fade as the door slammed shut behind Tubbo. He let out a deep sigh. “No problem, Tubbo,” he muttered quietly, to the empty room.

Though he didn’t let it show while Tubbo was around—he didn’t want the boy to worry about him, not when he couldn’t actually do anything about the situation—Phil was, for a lack of a better word, *done*. Tubbo thought that when he’d taken the clamps off his wings he’d made everything better. And while it had helped, to an extent—Phil could preen his feathers now, could certainly take better care of his wings, and the crushing weight of the magic was gone—he still wasn’t well. Things were better, sure, but only slightly. Phil was just so, so tired.

It wasn’t from lack of sleep—though his current conditions really didn’t encourage a healthy sleep schedule. No, it was instead a bone-deep weariness that he would only be able shake off when he was truly freed and allowed to once again spread his aching wings and soar through the open skies. Because even without the clamps, there was only so far they could stretch within the confines of his cell. His wings were stiff and sore from their lack of movement, their lack of flight, and it was taking its toll on them. When the wings of an avian hybrid wasted away, so too did the hybrid themselves.

Phil knew that Techno had probably sent him numerous messages through their communication system and that his son would be worrying over the lack of response. He knew that Tubbo was being manipulated and lied to and that even his best efforts were doing nothing to get the kid out from under the thumb of Quackity and Dream. He knew that something was being planned, something that spelled out disastrous consequences for himself and those he cared about.

He knew that he wasn't going to be getting out of this cell for a long, long time.

Phil knew he might die here.

It was those morose thoughts that lulled him into a fitful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Tubbo's trying his best. I think his coping mechanism is simply pretending that things are okay so hard he makes himself believe it. It's not going so well, but he's ignoring that fact.

graduations of arm's length

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rehabilitation was going to be a slow process.

Techno was by no means a physiotherapist, so it was going to be a learning journey for the both of them. Now that Tommy was healed of both his injuries and illnesses, Techno would, at the very least, be able to properly focus on helping him adjust to his amputated leg. Before, Techno disregarded any proper procedure and skipped straight to walking on his prosthesis. But this time, no matter how much Tommy griped and groaned about how slow the process was, he was going to do it right.

The information he'd managed to scrounge up on the topic said that, after the amputee was in a stable condition and before beginning to use a prosthetic, treatment of the amputated limb should include stretches and other such exercises, as well as learning how to prevent contractures—that is, tightness in the soft tissues that restrict the movement of the limb.

And, even though it was probably far too late to return to those first steps and even though, at this point, they would probably be useless, Techno would be damned if he didn't do them anyway. For all he knew, the exercises were vital for rehabilitation, and by skipping it originally he'd already butchered the process.

So one of the first things he did was take away Tommy's wooden foot.

"Give me your prosthetic," Techno said bluntly, holding out an expectant hand, just after Tommy had finished eating the meal he had given him—the first proper food he'd eaten in weeks.

Techno had expected resistance. He had expected an argument. He had expected Tommy to shout in protest, to swear at him with a multitude of his own brand of colourful insults and stubbornly refuse to hand the prosthetic over. He had, as much as he'd hated the idea, half expected to have to forcefully remove the prosthesis from Tommy's leg.

What he had not expected was his brother to shrink in on himself, reach down with hands that trembled ever-so-slightly, and begin to fumble to undo the bindings that held the prosthetic to his calf.

Techno's eyes narrowed, but he decided not to comment on the odd behaviour. After a few moments passed and Tommy continued to struggle to properly detach the foot, Techno heaved a sigh and took a step towards him, meaning to help with the process.

Tommy flinched violently, the shaking in his hands intensifying and only serving to make it harder for him to remove the foot. "I'm getting it off," he said quickly. "I'm sorry, I'm having trouble. But I promise, I'm going to give it to you."

Techno instantly backed away in response to Tommy's panic, raising his hands in a placating gesture, resolving to give him the space he obviously needed. Tommy relaxed minutely. It took a few more long, tense moments before he finally managed to remove the foot. He held it up to Techno, who took it and began crossing the room to stow it away until Tommy was ready to use it.

He was stopped, however, as Tommy spoke up. "Don't you want anything else?"

Techno turned, a question on his lips, but froze when he saw that Tommy had undone the latch of his fur cloak and was holding the garment out to him.

"Put that back on," he scolded. "You're gonna get cold."

Tommy stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Techno took a deep breath. Maybe explaining his reasoning behind taking the prosthetic would help. "I'm doing this to help you, Tommy," he said. He held the foot up. "Letting you have this was a bad idea. You can't be trusted not to fuck yourself over. I'll let you have it back once you learn."

Tommy paled and nodded quickly with a sharp, jerky moment. He retracted his arm, hugging the fur cloak to his chest, staring up at Techno with wide, horrified eyes. It was as though he was seeing something else. "Yeah. Sorry," he whispered. "I won't do it again. I'm really sorry."

Techno didn't understand why his actions and words were provoking such strong reactions, but it didn't take a genius to pick that it was due to something that had happened during his exile, before he'd arrived at the cabin. The thought of his brother's treatment brought forward a tide of frustration as rage and the volume of the voices, that had been growing steadily louder over the course of the interaction, swelled to a new height.

Dream did this, they screamed. Dream, Dream, Dream. Find him. Kill him. Blood for the Blood God.

Techno clenched his eyes shut and turned sharply, before Tommy could see the scowl that crossed his features at the thought of Dream's name. He stalked across the room and placed the prosthetic on top of one of his cabinets, keeping it safely out of Tommy's reach until he was more ready to use it.

By the time he turned back, he had calmed. He made his way back to the bed and crouched by it, shooting Tommy, who still hadn't relaxed, the most reassuring smile he could. "It's not permanent," he said quietly. "I promise you, I'm going to give you your prosthetic back. You just need to be more ready before you can walk on it. Right now, you'll only end up hurting yourself."

"Yeah, of course," Tommy muttered. "What do I have to do?"

"Exercises and stretches, to begin with. We can start now, if you'd like?"

“Yeah. Whatever.”

Techno stood and sat down on the chair set by the bed. “We’re gonna start with stretching out your leg. Extend the joint slowly, carefully, and make sure to stop if you feel any cramping or pain. Yeah, just like that. That’s perfect, good job. Now stop, and bend your knee again. Once again, take the movement slowly and stop at any time if you need to.”

Tommy followed Techno’s instructions carefully, first bending and unbending his knee, then rotating his joint, then maneuvering it in a variety of other directions. He stopped regularly, wincing as his muscles tightened and cramped painfully, and each time he would shoot a fleeting, fearful glance up at Techno.

Techno made a conscious effort not to react, instead keeping up his constant stream of instructions and reassurances, stating over and over that Tommy was okay, that he was doing well, that he could stop if he needed to or if he felt any pain. He found that, over the course of the session, the nervous glances grew less and less frequent as Tommy began trust Techno’s sincerity.

As the minutes dragged on and Tommy’s confidence grew, so too did how vocal he was regarding his dislike of the therapy. To be fair, his complaints weren’t completely unfounded. There were only so many different exercises to do, and even if there had been a wider variety it still would’ve been tedious.

About forty minutes passed before Techno finally sat back with a sigh, the mixture of Tommy’s unrelenting complaints and his own boredom eventually growing too strong to bear. “That’s it for today,” he said.

“Oh fucking *finally*,” Tommy said. “Y’know, I was really starting to worry that you were gonna drag that on forever.”

Techno leveled a half-hearted glare at him in response to his cheek. In reality, however, the return of Tommy’s brashness was relieving. It meant they were getting somewhere. Not that he’d ever admit that to Tommy’s face, of course. The gloating would be unbearable.

Techno slumped back into his chair, allowing himself to relax and his eyes to close. “I’m gonna sleep now,” he said. “Wake me if you need anything.”

Tommy scoffed. “You’re going to bed? The sun has barely set.”

“Yeah, and I’m tired. It’s been a long day. You should sleep too.”

Tommy hesitated for a moment before allowing a devilish grin to stretch over his face. “*Or*, I could keep you awake,” he said conspiratorially. “You know, I’m actually rather good at singing. They call me OperaInnit.”

“There is not a single person who has ever called you that,” Techno grumbled, eyes still closed.

“No, you're actually wrong. They all do. *All* of the women.” Tommy cleared his throat. “And I'll prove it to you!”

Techno squinted open his eyes and glared over at his brother, who was opening his mouth, preparing to demonstrate his singing prowess. “I swear to god, Tommy,” he muttered.

His brother snapped his mouth shut and grinned over at Techno, his eyes sparkling. “Hey, I’m just trying to help! If you go to bed too early, you’ll just fuck up your sleep schedule, and we can't have that! And anyway, if I sang now I’d be *gifting* you the opportunity to listen to my beautiful voice.”

Techno rolled his eyes. “I get enough of your 'beautiful' voice as is,” he said. “I would genuinely rather sleep with Carl than have to listen to your singing.”

Tommy pouted. “You are a *bitch*, Technoblade,” he said. “And I’m too good for you, anyway.”

“Yeah, sure,” Techno said as he shut his eyes again. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“I *will* keep telling myself that, and I’ll keep being right!”

Techno let out a short, agreeable hum.

Tommy, realising that his brother wasn’t going to continue rising to his bait, huffed out a breath and finally settled down onto his mattress. He'd never admit it to Techno, but he *was* actually feeling rather tired.

They fell asleep quickly.

-o-O-o-

Two days had passed since the totem had been used, Techno had taken Tommy’s prosthetic, and they had begun the physiotherapy. When Techno sat by the couch Tommy sat on to begin the session—this would be their third one—he could instantly tell there was something on his brother’s mind.

The signs were all subtle, barely noticeable, but there was something in the stiff way he held himself, the tight set of his expression, the almost contemplative gleam in his eyes, that told Techno something was off. Deciding not to mention it, to instead let Tommy open up when he was ready, he began the session.

It was the same exercises and stretches and the same few movements—rolling from side to side, sitting up and perching on the edge of the couch, moving safely to and from a chair—that they’d already gone through over the past days. They occasionally filled the time with idle chatter, but mostly just sat in silence. It took about twenty minutes before Tommy finally, properly spoke up.

“This exercise again? Seriously?” he asked incredulously as Techno instructed him to return to bending and unbending his knee. “That’s like the hundredth time you’ve told me to do this! I’m not gonna do it. You can’t make me.”

Techno raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Tommy glared back at him, crossing his arms resolutely. His eyes shone with something Techno couldn't quite decipher, something that ran deeper than the surface-level annoyance.

"Tommy," he said patiently. "This is for your own good. The more you do, the quicker you can walk."

"I can walk *now*," Tommy argued back. "You're treating me like I'm some sort of baby, like I can't do anything on my own. You're not even letting me *try* to walk!"

"It won't be too much longer," Techno said. "I just want to make sure you're ready."

"I'm ready now!" Tommy insisted. "Even with as fragile as you seem to think I am, you've got to see that I'm ready. I can walk!"

"You're not fragile, Tommy. I know you're not fragile," Techno said placatingly. "I just don't want anything to go wrong."

Tommy glared at Techno as the words that had meant to calm him down only served to rile him up more. "Do you not realise that you're still doing it? You're just proving my point!" Tommy pressed his hands against the couch and made to push himself forward, to his feet, but quickly seemed to think better of the action. "Techno, I'm not a fucking *child*."

Techno heaved a sigh. "It won't take too much longer," he repeated. "Just hold out for a few more days. Tommy, I'm doing this *for* you."

Tommy's manner took a turn for the worse, his expression hardening into a scowl, his words and tone growing harsher and more biting. "A few more days? *Days*, Techno? You can fuck right off with that. What *I* think you should just give me back the damn foot now. It's mine! You made it for me, you gave it to me! It's fucking *mine*! We've already been doing this for three days and nothing's changed! These exercises are useless."

Techno lifted a hand to rub at the bridge of his nose. "Tommy, I don't--"

"Oh, you shut right up Technoblade," Tommy scoffed. "You don't need to pretend. You just don't want me walking because you're worried I'm gonna fuck up your house, yeah? Yeah, I'm right! Of course, that's what you're worried about! Just fucking say it already!"

A frustrated breath hissed through Techno's teeth. "Just do the damn exercise," he interrupted, his voice low.

"Fuck you!" Tommy shouted, before continuing with his rant, "You're completely right to think that! You don't want me here, I *know* you don't want me here! So why the fuck are you wasting your time on these useless exercises? Why don't you just throw me out already?!"

Techno's hands clenched into tight fists. "Tommy," he said, and voice sounded dangerous even to his own ears.

"We both know I'm right, Techno. I only said the fucking truth. Now, what are you going to do about it, bitch?"

Techno's patience, already stretched thin by the past weeks, finally snapped. He shot to his feet, glaring down at Tommy, his breaths coming in sharp, angry huffs. Tommy flinched back into the couch, clutching his cloak around him like some sort of protective shield, staring up at him with wide eyes.

Techno took a step forward. As Tommy cringed back further, something that wasn't fear flickered in his eyes.

It took a moment before Techno recognised it for what it was. It was satisfaction. Tommy was feeling victorious. It took another moment before he realised exactly what was happening. This was a test. Tommy was poking and prodding at Techno, just to see how he would react.

And, judging by his apparent triumph, this had been what he'd expected. Techno had just proved him right.

Techno's eyes narrowed. If Tommy had expected a reaction like this... what did that mean? Had his calmness and happiness over the past days just been a mask of what he thought Techno wanted to see? All the progress Techno had thought they were making... was it all just a front? Techno's heart sunk at that realisation. He thought he had been helping, that they'd been getting somewhere, but maybe they'd yet to leave square one.

How was it that everything he was doing, all the care he was taking, was just falling through like this? It had happened when he'd physically been dealing with Tommy's illnesses, and was happening again now, with the emotional side of things. It seemed that Techno just couldn't get anything right.

What should he say? How should he deal with the situation his angry reaction had thrown them into?

There was always the option of just avoiding it entirely.

That sounded pretty appealing.

"That's it for today," he finally said as the silence stretched too long for him to bear. He wasn't exactly sure what he was feeling. Techno turned, stalking across the room and roughly pushing the door open. "Next time we'll start work on learning to properly put on and take off your prosthetic."

He stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind him, blocking himself from his cabin before Tommy even had the chance to respond.

He could have handled that better. He *should* have handled that better. But it was all so much. *Everything* was all so much.

Techno's steps were uneven as he made his way down the stairs of his porch and onto the snowy grass that surrounded his cabin.

Techno had assumed that, once Tommy's injuries and sickness had healed, everything would be okay. He had assumed that it would only take a few days to teach him to walk, after which he would be able to turn his focus to finding and saving Phil from whatever situation he had gotten himself into.

But Tommy needed so much more help than that. So much more help than Techno knew how to provide. Techno was so *hilariously* underqualified for this. He was trying his best, doing everything he could, but he had just proven that none of it was enough.

Techno leaned heavily against the stone wall of his cabin and buried his head in his hands.

Technohurt, the voices said quietly. They, at least, seemed to be in a calm mood. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to deal with anything else. *Technosad. Technolost.*

"I'm not lost," Techno said, almost petulantly.

No. Not physically.

He squinted. "What do you—"

We need Philza.

Techno stiffened. The two words rang in his head, repeated over and over by the chorus of voices that chanted them. After a moment, he heaved a sigh. "Tch. Yeah. Phil would know what to do."

You know too! You're good. You help.

"I *try* to help. I don't end up doing it."

Yes you do! they insisted. *Technohelp. Technodoctor. Save lives.*

Techno laughed bitterly. "No, I don't," he said. The memory of Tommy, lying in the bed, his body consumed by glowing hues of green and yellow, flashed through his head. "I don't save lives. I didn't save Tommy's life. I *couldn't* save his life. I had to resort to a— a fucking—" Techno took a shuddering breath, tangling his fingers into his hair and trying desperately to calm himself down. "I can't save the lives that matter," he finally muttered.

He shoved the voices aside as they began murmuring in discontent at his bitter response. At the moment they were, thankfully, mellow enough for him to be able to do so.

Techno lifted his head from his hands and cast his gaze towards the sky. It was a nice enough day, he supposed, if he didn't account for what was actually happening.

If Techno were honest with himself, he knew that he deserved this. After everything he'd done to Tommy, to the boy's friends, to his nation. Tommy was right not to trust him. This, what Techno was doing, the help he was trying to offer, was probably some subconscious cry for forgiveness. Not that he deserved to be forgiven.

Techno groaned and tipped his head forward again, pushing himself from the stone wall. Moping would do him no good, but he also didn't want to go back inside and face his brother. Techno struggled for a moment to think of something else he could do. He... he still needed to repair Carl's pen.

Techno walked over to the area where the fence had been. Carl stood inside, his head bowed, his eyes closed. He was dozing. Techno resolved to let the horse sleep and ignored him while he made quick mental measurements of how much fencing he'd need. The trip to his storage room was a quick one. Techno kept quiet as he pulled a few fences and fence gates from the chest he'd dedicated to wooden items and then made his way back outside.

Carl had, by this point, blinked his eyes open and was now staring at Techno, something achingly sad in his brown eyes.

"What's wrong?" Techno asked quietly, carefully stowing the fences away and stepping up to the horse.

Carl stomped his hoof and nodded towards Techno.

Techno raised a hand to his chest, his brows furrowing confusedly. "What do you-" His eyes widened in realisation. "Oh. Is it really that obvious?"

Carl bobbed his head up and down.

Techno let out a huff of a laugh. "I guess you've got me there. You're probably the most emotionally capable one in this damn cabin."

Carl snorted softly.

"Well, I'm sorry for waking you. I just gotta rebuild your pen. Shouldn't take me too long," Techno explained as he pulled the fences back into his hands.

Carl bobbed his head again, this time in understanding, and pranced around until he stood beside Techno, who allowed a small smile to stretch over his face.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he muttered as he began burying a fence post into the snowy ground.

Carl snorted and tossed his head. Agreement.

Rebuilding the fence was slow but relaxing work, the repetitive motion of pounding the wooden posts into the ground and then hammering the horizontal slats into place helping to calm Techno down.

He worked slower than he usually would, as to give himself as long of a break as possible. By the time he was finished the sun hung high in the sky.

Techno petted Carl on the side of the neck and pulled out an apple as both a thank you for his support and an apology for taking so long to rebuild his fence. The horse gratefully took the treat and munched it slowly as he made his way into his new pen.

Techno turned back to his cabin and heaved a sigh. He'd stalled as much as he reasonably could. It was time to face the music. He trudged up the stairs, pulled the door open, and prepared himself for a barrage of shouted insults and colourful swears.

All of which, rather anticlimactically, never came.

Techno crept into his cabin, crossed the room, and stared down at Tommy. He was lying on his side, curled in a ball, clutching his cloak tightly around his shoulders.

He was asleep.

That would do it.

-0-

When Tommy awoke, Techno was adding the finishing touches to the crutches he'd been working on for the past days.

Techno set his project aside and stood, striding over to his brother but stopping a few feet from the couch he lay on. "How do you feel?"

Tommy, who had by this point pushed himself into a sitting position, blinked groggily up at him, lifting a hand to rub at his eyes. "I-" he cut himself off with a yawn. "I'm okay."

Techno inclined his head in a single nod. "That's good," he said.

Tommy squinted at Techno with sleep-hazed eyes for a moment longer before realisation seemed to dawn on him. His eyes widened fractionally and he winced back, staring up at him with newfound fear. "I, uh, yeah. It's good. It's very good."

Techno turned away from him and made his way over to the cabinet at the side of the room. He reached up, grabbed the prosthetic foot, and made his way back to Tommy's side.

Tommy watched his movements with a mix of fear, wariness, and confusion.

Techno held out the prosthetic. "Here," he said. "I want to see how you would put it on."

Tommy reached out and gingerly took the foot. He kept his eyes locked on Techno, then glanced down at the prosthetic, then looked back up. "Are we going to... talk about what happened?"

"No," Techno said shortly, taking a seat at his chair by the couch. "Try it on."

Tommy nodded unsurely, pulling his right leg up and bending it so that it rested across his left knee. Techno crossed his arms and watched critically as he set the padded socket of the prosthetic against the stump of his calf, took a hold of the leather straps, and began trying to wrap them around his leg.

It took a couple of minutes of fruitlessly trying to correctly secure them before Tommy let out a frustrated groan and let go of them, allowing the foot to fall out the ground. "It's

impossible,” he said.

Techno let his arms drop to his side with a sigh. “Do you mind if I step a bit closer?”

Tommy hesitated for a moment before he shook his head. “I don’t mind. Do what you want,” he muttered.

Techno moved slowly as he stepped forward and stooped down to pick up the prosthesis. He set the foot against the floor, holding it so that it sat vertically underneath Tommy’s right knee. “You want to hold it like this, against the floor, and then slip your leg into the socket,” he explained. “What you were doing, holding it against your leg, doesn’t work.”

Tommy scowled. “You could’ve told me that earlier.”

“I could have, yes, but then you wouldn’t have learned. Here, lean down and hold the prosthesis in place.”

Tommy did as instructed, and once Techno was assured that he was holding it securely, he let go and took a slight step back.

“Now, put your leg into the socket. Yeah, just like that.” Techno knelt by the couch, reaching out to take hold of the straps. “Properly applying these seems complicated—while making it I went with security over simplicity—but it should make sense once it’s actually been explained.”

Tommy nodded along as Techno began outlining the process, detailing it in words rather than making the movements. Once the verbal demonstration was finished and he started actually showing Tommy the steps, he took each one slowly and made sure that Tommy understood everything and was able to replicate it before moving on.

By the time the prosthesis was properly attached to his leg, Tommy had allowed a small, excited grin to split his face.

Techno tried not to think about the fact that he couldn’t be sure whether it was genuine or not.

“Does that all make sense?” Techno asked.

Tommy nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I’m trying to design a different model that shouldn’t even need straps. It’s... well, I think I’m going to need help before I can even think about actually making it. I’ve never been great at that sort of thing. For now, this one will have to do.”

“I think this one will work just fine.”

“Now,” Techno said, standing and making his way over to the table that stood in the centre of the room. “I could either teach you the process of removing the prosthetic or,” he turned, and Tommy’s eyes widened as he saw that he was holding the crutches he’d made, “you could try walking.”

Tommy's eyes sparkled. "I want to walk, please."

"A shocking decision," Techno said dryly. He crossed the room and held out the crutches. "Have you used crutches before?"

"Yeah I have," Tommy said, but made no move to reach out and grab them. Instead, he stared silently at the crutches for a moment before raising his eyes to meet Techno's. "But... do you think I can try on my own, first?"

Techno hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, sure," he said, turning to lean the crutches against the wall. "But you've got to take it slowly. Learn to stand first, then take it one steady step at a time and we'll work our way up from there. No instantly trying to stagger across the room, or trying to run, or trying to leave the damn house."

Tommy huffed out a laugh. "Would I *really* do any of that?"

Techno leveled him with a deadpan stare.

"Okay, so, I *might* deserve that," Tommy admitted after a moment's pause. "Possibly. Maybe. A bit deserved. *But*, only a little bit." He took a deep breath. "I'll take it slowly, I promise."

Techno held out his hands for support in case Tommy needed help staying upright. "You can push yourself to your feet," he said. "Try to keep your weight evenly distributed—don't put all the pressure on your left leg just because it's easier to stand on."

Tommy grit his teeth together and did as instructed, pressing his hands against the edge of the couch and slowly rising to his feet. As soon as he stood straight enough, he threw his hands out in an attempt to keep himself balanced. He wobbled dangerously, teetering from side to side, struggling to stay still.

"Hey, hey, you're okay," Techno said as Tommy's pulse quickened. "Keep breathing, keep breathing. Take a seat if you need to, or grab onto me for support. You can try crouching down. It might help you balance."

Tommy furrowed his brows in concentration and gave no other indication that he'd heard Techno's reassurances. But then he let out a heavy exhale, and, keeping his arms splayed out, lowered himself so that his centre of gravity sat closer to the ground. As Techno had predicted, his balance quickly grew stabler, and it only took a few more tense moments before he was able to stand with minimal movement.

The voices cheered as a bright, jubilant grin stretched across Tommy's face. *StableInnit*, they chanted. *StandingInnit*.

Tommy glanced up at Techno. "Hey, do you see this?" he asked excitedly. "I can do it! I can stand!"

"Good job, Tommy," Techno said sincerely. "Now you can try standing up straight. Take it carefully, of course."

Tommy, too invigorated by his success to properly listen to Techno's advice, instead took his words as a go-ahead to shoot instantly into a more upright position. His eyes widened as the sudden, quick movement threw him off balance and he began tipping backwards.

Tommy's right leg instinctively stepped back to try and help catch him, but rather than help, the unfamiliar sensation of his foot being set against the ground but him being unable to actually *feel* it meant that instead of holding him up, his leg buckled under him and only served to speed up his fall.

Techno lunged forward and caught Tommy under his arms, holding him up as he struggled to regain his footing. The voices, who had cried out in distress as Tommy fell, began to laugh. *UnstableInnit*, they cackled. *FallenInnit*.

Techno barely managed to stifle a snort at their antics. He knew it wouldn't go down well. "I said to take it slowly," he scolded instead. The 'I told you so' went unsaid but was audible in his tone.

"Literally shut up," Tommy grumbled as he managed to get his feet back under him and then pushed against Techno, who planted his feet firmly against the ground so he could be a stable support for him to lean against.

Techno kept his arms outstretched as Tommy hesitantly let go of him and tried to once again stand on his own. It took a few moments of shaky standing before Tommy reached out and took hold of his hands, after which his stance grew a whole lot steadier.

Tommy heaved a sigh, obviously rather dejected by his lack of progress and independence.

"Do you want to try using the crutches?" Techno asked softly.

Tommy paused for a moment before eventually nodding sullenly. Techno slowly released his grip on his left hand, but kept it hovering underneath just in case Tommy needed to grab onto it again for support.

"Why is this so hard?" Tommy whispered after a moment, almost too quiet to be heard. "I used to walk just fine."

Techno considered not answering—it didn't feel like the words were directed at him. But Tommy needed reassurance, even if it was just in the form of a few simple words. "It's fine, Tommy," he said.

Tommy was silent for another moment, staring down at his feet. "I'm not a baby," he muttered. Again, more to himself than Techno.

"You're not," he said, his voice firm with the resolve he knew Tommy needed to feel.

Tommy scoffed but didn't respond.

Techno carefully leaned towards the crutches but made sure to keep a firm, supportive grip on Tommy's right hand. He grabbed them from where they leaned against the wall and then held them out.

“I’ve been working on making them as comfortable as possible. It’s all a bit experimental, but I tried using enchantments,” Techno explained. “You should be able to use them indefinitely without feeling any pain or discomfort.”

“Hey that’s... that’s really cool, actually,” Tommy said. He stared at the crutches for a moment, then glanced up at Techno. “Thanks.”

Tommy took one of the crutches with his left hand and held it almost reverently. He stared at it for a moment longer before slotting it under his armpit and leaning some of his weight on it. With the support offered by the crutch, he was able to let go of Techno’s right hand and grab onto the other crutch.

Techno stepped back slowly, ready to catch Tommy in case something else went wrong or he ended up needing more support. Tommy smiled at him, now able to stand almost effortlessly with the help of the crutches.

“You can try walking around, if you’d like,” Techno said after several moments ticked by and Tommy continued to stand stably. “Try to rely on crutches as little as you can, but don’t make it too hard on yourself.”

Tommy, who had been waiting for the go-ahead, shot Techno a small nod. He set the tips of the crutches in front of him, stepped forward with his prosthesis, and then used the stability to step forward with his left leg.

Techno watched as he repeated the process a few times until he’d made his way to the other side of the room. Tommy carefully reached out a hand and touched the wall, as though marking his progress, before he pivoted and began crossing back towards Techno.

His eyes sparkled. “Thanks, Techno,” he said as he reached the couch. He turned and slowly lowered himself into a seated position. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” Techno said, taking the crutches as Tommy held them out to him and leaning them gently against a wall. “You did well.” Techno knelt by Tommy’s side. “Now, I’ll teach you how to properly remove the prosthetic.”

Tommy listened with a rather uncharacteristic attentiveness as Techno used the same teaching method as before—first, carefully explaining the process before beginning the practical removal. “Just before you start unstrapping it, you should know that I added a sort of emergency removal system,” Techno said. He gestured at a small latch on the side of the leg. “Pull down on this and the straps will detach from the foot and it will just fall away. It’s... a precaution. Might be paranoia, but, y’know.”

“Makes sense,” Tommy said.

“Now, do you remember the first step?”

Techno nodded approvingly as Tommy reached down and unclasped the straps from where they were buckled around his thigh. He was able to undo it all with minimal input from

Techno, though the few times he did need help all he had to do was glance up questioningly and Techno would explain what he needed to do.

Once Tommy had removed the prosthesis, he looked up at Techno. "What do I do with it?" he asked.

"Will you want to do any more practice with your... foot?"

Tommy shook his head. "I'm tired," he said.

Techno held out his hand. Mindful of how Tommy had reacted last time he'd asked for him to hand over the prosthesis, he was careful as he asked, "Do you mind if I take it? I'll leave it within your reach."

Tommy hesitated momentarily before holding it out. Techno took it, and was aware of the way his brother's eyes tracked his movements as he leaned down and set it by the couch. Once Tommy saw that the foot was well and truly well within an arm's length of him, a subtle tension drained from his shoulders.

"If you ever want to practice putting it on and taking it off, go ahead," Techno said. "But I'd rather you wait until I'm supervising you to try walking. It's not because I don't trust you enough. I just don't want anything to go wrong."

"Sounds like a plan, Big Man," Tommy said. The opportunity to walk had put him in a good mood, good enough to agree to the terms, though Techno hardly expected him to keep his word. After all, he *was* TommyInnit.

Techno pushed himself to his feet and made his way over to the kitchenette in the corner of the room. "Now, I assume you're hungry," he said as he began pulling out the equipment he'd need to cook. "What do you want to eat?"

Tommy immediately perked up at the mention of food, another wide grin stretching over his face.

The snowy wasteland outside was barren and desolate and bitterly, bitterly cold. But inside Techno's lonely cabin, two brothers basked in the warmth of the crackling fire and the joy of each other's company. As the sun set, casting brilliant hues of pink and gold over the wide expanse of snow, two members of an otherwise broken family sat by the fireplace, talking and laughing and, occasionally, just sitting in a comfortable, companionable silence.

For them, things were good.

Chapter End Notes

They're brothers, your honour

Just clarifying here that, as of right now, the two timelines don't really line up properly. By that I mean — last chapter, for Phil, it was the 22nd of December. For Tommy and Techno, at the end of this chapter, it's more like,,,, the 19th? I don't know the exact dates, but yeah, they're not totally aligned. Soon they will meet up, though.

SOME [FANART](#) BY TIMX! PLACING THIS ONE WAS A BIT DIFFICULT BECAUSE IT'S THREE PIECES OF ART FROM VARIOUS PARTS OF THE STORY, BUT I DECIDED TO PUT IT IN THIS CHAPTER BECAUSE THE LATEST OF THE ART PEICES IS BASED ON EVENTS FROM THIS CHAPTER! THE PIECES ARE DREAM HOLDING THE ORB, TOMMY WITH HIS PROSTHETIC, AND TECHNO HELPING TOMMY WALK!!

a burning memory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Two days had passed since Tommy had first crossed the cabin with the support of his crutches.

That was why the fact that legs were steady underneath him as he stood, unsupported, was strange.

Even though it was strange, Tommy didn't question it. Everything was a bit strange. Countless little details of the world were off and Tommy didn't know why. He also didn't care to know why.

The fireplace of Techno's cabin was full of nothing but charcoal and ash, the remnants of yesterday's fire, but heat still wafted from that corner of the room, warm enough that Tommy felt comfortable in the thin clothing he wore. He glanced down at his feet, at the prosthetic that almost seemed to blend with the cabin's wooden floor. His stance remained stable as he took a step forward. He looked up, over at the door of the cabin, and wondered where Techno was.

When Tommy took his next step forward, his boot crunched against snow. He was outside, now. The heavy, comforting weight of his winter clothing pressed down on his skin, shielding him from the harsh weather.

Time seemed to warp as Tommy wandered aimlessly, a few seconds and a few hours passing simultaneously before something finally changed. He was still standing where he had been, a few feet shy of the base of Techno's porch. But now there was a tiny figure, just barely visible, silhouetted against the horizon.

Tommy squinted at them. The distance rendered them unrecognisable but it barely took a few seconds for him to realise who they were.

"Techno!" he shouted happily, breaking into a run, angling towards his brother. His strides were long and fast, and Tommy found that keeping his balance was something he was able to do without a second thought.

Techno didn't move.

Techno began to grow larger and more in focus as Tommy closed the distance between them, but when he spared a glance behind him he found that he still hadn't moved.

He kept running.

"Techno!" he called out again, once he was close enough for him to properly make out the details of his brother's form.

This time, Techno looked up at him.

Tommy slowed his pace.

There was something off about Techno. Something in the tenseness of his posture, in the stiffness of his shoulders, in the hard set of his expression. They locked gazes. Tommy came to a complete stop, his heart hammering in his throat, blood roaring through his ears. Something akin to dread began to rise as he stared into Techno's flickering green eyes.

There was something in his eyes, there was something wrong with his eyes, his eyes, it was in his eyes.

Then Tommy blinked, and everything was okay. Techno's eyes were red and sparkled with pride, his stance was relaxed and welcoming, and a warm smile was spread across his face. Sunlight glistened off his pearly white teeth.

Techno spread out his arms in an invite. "You walked, Tommy! You did it! I told you you'd learn."

Tommy allowed himself to smile back, a small, triumphant grin. Techno was right, he *had* walked, and he'd done a damn good job of it too. "Thank you," he said, stepping towards his brother, into his open arms, wrapping his own arms around Techno's chest and pulling him into a hug. "Thank you, Techno."

Rather than return the embrace, Techno settled his hands onto his shoulders. Tommy glanced up curiously. Had he misinterpreted the spread arms?

Techno was still smiling down at him.

There was something with his eyes, with his teeth, with his eyes, his eyes.

"Techno?" Tommy asked carefully, making to pull back from the one-sided embrace. He was stopped as Techno squeezed, the tips of his netherite gauntlets digging harshly into his arms and holding him in place.

Techno hadn't been wearing armour.

Tommy's pulse quickened and he pushed his hands against Techno's chestplate in an attempt to back away. The grip on his shoulders was too strong. "Techno, you're hurting me."

There was something wrong with Techno's face. He was still smiling, but it lacked any of its previous warmth. His teeth were too sharp. The corners of his mouth cut into his cheeks, pulling up further than should be possible. His eyes were dark and green and danced with something that wasn't joy.

His hold on Tommy's shoulders tightened further.

"You walked, Tommy," he repeated, and this time the words were low and dangerous, lacking any of their previous cheer. "What did I tell you about walking?"

Tommy's eyes were wide with horror as he stared up at Techno. His legs were shaking. His balance was gone. Techno's hands were the only thing stopping him from collapsing. "What do you mean? Y-you said I could—"

Techno interrupted him with a sharp, "I *said* not to do it without my supervision. And what did you do, Tommy?" His face was frozen in the unsettling grin, an expression that only continued to widen.

"I—I didn't mean to—"

"I gave you everything you needed, Tommy. I made that prosthetic for you, trusted you with its use. All I asked was that you waited for me before you walked on it. One simple thing, Tommy. And you couldn't even do that for me."

"Techno I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, I really didn't mean to. I won't do it again, I promise. I won't ever do it again. I'm sorry."

Techno's grin continued to widen, far, far past the limits of his face. Blood began to spill from where the corners of his mouth cut into his cheeks, yet still the smile grew. His eyes darkened further, until they seemed to be nothing but empty sockets.

Blood started dripping from his eyes, like crimson tears pouring down his cheeks.

The chilling, inhuman smile. The black, empty eyes.

(That same grin staring at him from a blank porcelain mask.)

Tommy's blood was frozen in his veins.

When Techno spoke next, his voice echoed with one that wasn't his own. "Sorry doesn't cut it, Tommy."

It was dark, now. A moonless night. Tommy pushed desperately against Techno, struggling to get back, to get away, to escape and run and hide from him, from Dream, from everyone and anyone and everything and anything.

Techno abruptly let go of Tommy's shoulders, sending him careening back into the snow. He watched, unnervingly still, as Tommy desperately tried to scramble to his feet, to crawl away from him, to escape from the horrific, inhuman stare.

The skeletal trunks of darkened trees loomed over him, laughing, jeering, taunting.

Tommy let out a cry as his back slammed into a hard stone wall. They hadn't moved and yet he found, when he frantically cast his gaze around, that they were in the basement of the cabin, below the storage room.

Techno took two long strides towards Tommy's cowering form until he towered over him, a terrifying figure silhouetted in the darkness of the basement. "New rule, Tommy," he said, his voice continuing to mutate into one that wasn't his, into Dream's, into *Dream's*. Tommy's

breath hitched as Techno reached down and grabbed a hold of his prosthetic. “No more walking.”

Tommy’s eyes widened, horrified, a moment before Techno wrenched his arm back, foregoing any sort of detachment and tearing the prosthetic straight from his leg. The leather straps around his calf and thigh twisted painfully as the foot was ripped away, and Tommy let out another cry of fear and pain.

When Techno next spoke, there was no trace of his own voice in his words. His face, still contorted into that terrifying, bloody mask, smiled coldly down at Tommy. Dream’s voice said, “Tommy, I thought that we were *friends*. I made this for you, I thought I could trust you with it. But it doesn’t seem that I learned from exile. You betrayed me then, and you betrayed me again now. This time, Tommy, you’re not getting away.”

“Dream I’m so sorry,” Tommy sobbed, scrambling to search for any way to escape the situation. “I thought I could be independent, I thought that, if I walked, you’d be happy. I thought you’d be proud of me. I didn’t think-”

Techno’s body reached down and grabbed him by the throat, cutting him off and pulling him harshly up the rocky wall of the basement. Tommy’s legs kicked out frantically under him, his left foot just barely able to find purchase on the ground.

“Yes, Tommy. You didn’t *think*,” Dream hissed. “You didn’t follow my one simple instruction. And it seems that *you* didn’t learn from Logsted either. You know what happens to rule breakers, Tommy.”

Tommy could do nothing but claw desperately at the iron grip around his throat as the ground below his feet began shifting and falling away, yawning open to reveal a roughly hewn hole that led into a cave that he knew oh-too well.

“Please,” Tommy forced out, his breaths coming in short, ragged gasps. The fingers around his neck began to loosen. “Please, Dream-”

He couldn’t even choke out a scream as Techno’s body dropped him and he began plummeting down the tunnel. The landing was harsh and jarring and Tommy swore he felt something shatter, and all he could do was crumple to the ground, unable to support his weight on his one leg. The walls of the cave seemed to press in on him, strangling him, suffocating him, bringing rise to all the memories and feelings he’d been repressing. Days of pain, illness, injury. Days of fear, hopelessness, despair. Broken little sobs forced their way through his crushed throat and trembling lips.

Items began landing on the stone around him, thrown down from above. His prosthetic, his crutches, his cloak, his compass, followed by suits and suits of battered iron armour that rattled and screeched as they bashed against each other and the ground. There were dozens of them.

One set for each day of his exile.

“Drop your armour, Tommy. Drop it in the pit or I’ll kill you.”

Fear and helplessness clawed at Tommy's chest. He knew what was coming next.

"Let this be a lesson, Tommy," came Dream's voice, echoing through the tunnel and reverberating through Tommy's ears and skull, growing louder and louder until it was broken by the sound of something else hitting the ground with a heavy thud and a low, persistent hissing.

Tommy could only stare in silent horror as the fuse of the TNT slowly burnt down to the explosive itself. There was nothing he could do.

The flame reached the bomb.

The hissing stopped.

There was a moment of silence.

Then Tommy *screamed* as his world was engulfed in a wave of crushing pressure and blinding light. He thrashed violently as the blast tore through his limbs, catching and tangling his arms in his blankets and bedding as he desperately tried to escape the agony of the explosion.

Tommy tumbled off the side of his bed with a jerk and a choked scream, his eyes snapping open and darting frantically, unseeingly, around the room he was in. His hand raised to his mouth to stifle his cries, an instinct he had adopted during his exile.

He had learned early on to silence himself when waking from nightmares.

Dream had hated it when he woke up screaming.

The silence of the room was a deafening contrast to the explosions that still rang in his ears. His skin burned from the phantom memory of the blast, of the pain, of the split-second feeling of being torn limb from limb by the TNT just before he'd jolted awake. Tommy barely managed to hold back a sob.

His hand shook where it was clamped over his mouth, his hair was sticky with sweat and clung uncomfortably to his forehead, and his heartbeat was almost overwhelmingly loud as it pounded in his ears. Tommy blinked hard to clear his eyes of the tears that had welled in them.

He inhaled a deep, shuddering breath, held it for a moment, then exhaled slowly. In his head, he repeated like a mantra the words, *I am safe, I am in Techno's cabin, I am safe in Techno's cabin.*

He tried to ignore the part of himself that whispered that the pit he had been thrown into in his nightmare was right below him.

I am safe, I am in Techno's cabin, I am safe in Techno's cabin.

Tommy's heart rate began to slow as he sat on the hard wooden floor, tangled in his blankets, counting his breaths and pushing back the lingering traces of terror that clung to him.

He was okay.

A few more moments passed before he finally calmed enough for his rational mind to return and allow him to properly deal with his situation. First thing first—Tommy scowled and began tugging at the blankets, pulling himself free from them and then throwing them to the side. He pushed himself to his knees, pressed his hands against the wall for support, but froze moments before he properly stood.

“New rule, Tommy. No more walking.”

Tommy’s breath hitched as the memory of Techno’s face, contorted into a macabre version of Dream’s mask, flashed before his eyes, and he found himself dropping his hands to his side before he made the conscious decision to.

That had been a nightmare. Tommy knew it had been a nightmare. But Techno *had* told him not to walk without supervision and Tommy... Tommy knew what happened to rule breakers.

Tommy shuddered, bowing his head, wrapping his arms tightly around himself. He didn’t know how long he sat like that before a quiet knock at the door broke him from his thoughts.

The pace of Tommy’s heart began to pick back up. He jerked his head up, stared silently at the door with wide eyes as dredges of irrational panic and fear rising in his chest.

The knock came again, louder this time, more insistent. “Tommy?” came Techno’s voice. “Are you awake?”

Before Tommy even had the chance to respond, the door handle began twisting open and Techno gently pushed open the door and peered inside. He was holding a steaming mug.

Gauntleted hands gripping his shoulders, darkened green eyes watching him, a twisted smile. Techno’s body, Dream’s voice, Dream’s words, Dream’s actions, Dream, Dream, Dream—

“Tommy?” Techno asked carefully, staring down at him with worried crimson eyes (not green, not green, not here). He pushed the door open all the way and took a cautious step into the room. “Are you okay?”

Tommy hesitated before shaking his head slowly.

“Nightmares?” The one-word question was gentle, full of empathy and concern.

Tommy nodded.

Techno sighed softly and knelt down, staying several feet from Tommy, giving him his space. “How long ago did you wake up?”

Tommy swallowed heavily before muttering, “A few minutes, I think. I don’t really know.”

Techno winced guiltily. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” he said. “I was...” he glanced down at the mug in his hand. “Well, to be perfectly honest, I was making hot chocolate and had to get more milk.”

Tommy snorted softly. "Perfect timing for that."

"Yeah." Techno pushed himself to his feet. He set his mug aside. "Do you want help getting up?"

Tommy nodded again, but this time the gesture was slower and more cautious.

Techno stepped forward and held out a hand. Tommy only hesitated for a moment before he reached up and grabbed onto it, then used its support to pull himself up. He kept a tight hold on the hand as he stood unstably on his left foot.

Techno held Tommy up as he hopped over to the bed, then helped him turn around and lower himself onto the edge of the mattress. He stooped down to pick up the blankets that were strewn messily over the floor and dumped them next to Tommy.

"Keep yourself warm," Techno instructed, turning and picking up his hot chocolate. He held it out, as though showing it to Tommy. "Do you want some?"

Tommy blinked owlishly at the mug, the offer catching him completely off guard. "I think... yeah," he said after a moment. He reached over and tugged a blanket around his shoulders, like a cape. "That would be nice."

"You can have this," Techno said, holding it out further, an invitation to take it. "I'll make myself some more."

Tommy stared down at the mug, glanced up at Techno as though gauging his sincerity, before reaching out and hesitantly threading his fingers around it. The ceramic was startlingly warm. Tommy hadn't realised how cold his hands had been until they'd come into contact with the sharp, contrasting heat. The trembling in his fingers, something else he hadn't noticed, lessened as he gazed down at the mug, at the murky, rippled reflection he could see staring back at him.

He hardly noticed as Techno left the room. Tommy lifted his legs up to the mattress and pushed himself back with his left foot, until he sat with his back resting against the wall.

It was just a nightmare, he told himself. You're fine. You're okay. You know how to deal with these.

Tommy heaved a sigh and lifted the mug to his lips. He winced as the scalding drink burned his tongue.

"Yeah, you'll want to be careful with that," Techno said as he reentered the room, holding a new mug. "It's still hot."

"No shit," Tommy muttered.

Techno walked over to a bookshelf, leafed through the titles for a moment, before reaching out and pulling one from the shelf. He settled into his seat by the bed, set his drink on the bedside table, and opened the book whose title Tommy hadn't managed to catch.

Tommy watched him cautiously, waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Techno to force him to open up about his dream. It was what people always did, whenever they saw him waking up from a nightmare. He expected nothing else from Techno, who could, at times, be overbearing with his concern.

A few minutes of anxious waiting ticked by before Tommy finally spoke. “Aren’t you going to ask me what my dream was about?”

“Nah,” Techno said, glancing up from his book. “Why? D’you want me to?”

Tommy shook his head. “No. I don’t. But everyone does it anyway. Ever since...” he looked down at his hands, picking uncomfortably at his fingernails. “I’ve had nightmares since the control room, and whenever someone’s there when I wake, they tell me to talk about it. Say it’s good for me, or some shit like that.”

Techno’s voice lacked the pity Tommy had expected to hear as he said, “Tommy, I don’t want you to tell me unless *you* want to. If you’d prefer to stay quiet then, well, just stay quiet. It’s your choice.”

Tommy stared at him for a long moment, his jaw clenched, surprise and suspicion warring in his gaze. “Why are you doing this, Techno?” he eventually asked “Why are you treating me like this?”

Techno sighed and set his book aside. “I have nightmares too,” he said. “I know how you’re feelin’. And I know that I don’t want to be coddled, and I don’t want to talk about it. It’s just nice if someone is *there*. And I don’t know if that’s healthy—hell, it’s probably not—but I’m not going to expect you to open up when I don’t do it either.”

The words were touching, their revelation private. A part of Tommy wanted to ask what someone like Techno could have nightmares about, what he had to be scared of. Tommy pushed back the urge and just shook his head. That hadn’t been what he was trying to ask. “No,” he said. “No, not about the nightmare. Not about this, not specifically. Just... in general. Over the past however many days we’ve been here. Why are you being so *kind*?”

Techno blinked. “Tommy it’s because I... because we’re... I care about you.” His eyes dropped to the ground. “We’re family, Tommy.”

Tommy bit back the scathing remark that bubbled in his throat. *You didn’t seem concerned about that when you executed my best friend, when you beat me half-to-death in a pit, when you betrayed me for Dream and Wilbur and helped them blow up L’Manberg.*

Instead, he settled for a bitter, “If that’s what you think, then why didn’t you visit me in exile? You didn’t come for me while Dream was- you didn’t come once. You didn’t care. *No one* cared. And then suddenly we’re family again, when you find me, half-dead, in a fucking hole under your house? What the fuck is with that?”

“I wanted to visit you,” Techno muttered, his eyes still downcast. “I wanted to help.”

“Then why didn’t you? It was your choice, Techno! You knew, and you didn’t fucking care!” Tommy’s breath came in short, sharp huffs as he glared at Techno.

Techno’s gaze flickered up to him, and for a moment Tommy was swamped by a wave of irrational fear, for a moment he half-expected to see the dead eyes and the bloody smile. But his eyes were still red, still soft and concerned, and Tommy had to remind himself:

It was Techno, it was Techno, Tommy could yell at him, could get angry at him. Techno was okay with it, he let Tommy do it, let him shout, let him argue. He wouldn’t hurt him. He wasn’t Dream. He wasn’t Dream. He was Techno.

“Tommy,” Techno said slowly, his brow furrowing in consternation. “I didn’t know where you were. I asked Phil, and he didn’t know either. He asked around L’Manberg and said that *no one* knew where you were.”

Tommy froze, staring at Techno with wide, confused eyes. “No,” he said. “No, that can’t be right. Dream told me—he said he told everyone where I was. And even if he hadn’t, the invites to the party had my coordinates. Ghostbur gave them out. Dream told me that Ghostbur gave them out.”

“Tommy... what else did he tell you?”

Tommy shivered, the blanket suddenly not enough to keep out the chill of the room. He brought his mug to his lips and took a drink, avoiding Techno’s gaze. “I don’t wanna talk about it,” he muttered after he swallowed.

Techno stared at him for a long moment before he heaved a sigh. “That’s okay, Tommy. But Dream lied to you. No one knew where you were. I haven’t seen Wilbur in weeks and, last I heard, neither has L’Manberg. I just assumed he was with you. From what I gathered, Dream told L’Manberg that he was with you. Did you ever hear from *Wilbur* that he handed out the invites?”

Tommy shook his head. “No,” he said bitterly. “He left after we planned the party. I haven’t seen him since then. He just doesn’t care about me.”

Techno was silent for a moment before he asked, “Is that what Dream told you?”

Tommy’s fingers tightened around his mug.

“Figures,” Techno muttered, leaning back in his seat. His expression was brooding, but Tommy recognised the subtle tension of his posture as the anger it was.

It wasn’t Dream. It was Techno.

Tommy swallowed heavily and hesitantly asked, “Do you think we could talk about something else?”

Techno’s eyes widened fractionally, a guilty spark shining in them. “Yeah,” he said. “Of course, Tommy. You said that before, too. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Tommy said.

The conversation swiftly changed as they began talking about various inconsequential matters. Tommy led the shift in topic, reminiscing on times gone by, on a time before wars and deaths and nightmares, of a time when they had been a family, when they had been content. When that became too nostalgic for either of them to bear, Techno began speaking of the progress he had made with the new prosthetic he was designing as well as other projects he was working on.

Together they began discussing Tommy’s progress with relearning how to walk. During the sessions he’d had with Techno—he still wasn’t allowed to walk on his own—he had learned to stand more-or-less without support, though he was still rather unstable and struggled to take more than a few shaky steps before he ended up tumbling over.

Considering the fact that it had only been a few days since he first tried walking he was making good headway, and that was something Techno had assured him of multiple times. Even so, Tommy couldn’t help but feel disheartened.

He just wanted to walk again, without needing to rely on Techno’s presence or his pair of crutches, but it was proving to be far, far more difficult than he ever would have imagined it being.

As the light of the barely-rising sun began peeking through the windows, bathing the cabin in a warm yellow glow, the conversation began to shift topics again, and again, before eventually settling into a comfortable silence. Tommy considered trying to fall back asleep, but the dread that clawed up his throat at the thought of another nightmare was enough to dismiss the idea.

It was only once the sun had properly risen that Techno set his book to the side, stood and stretched, then turned to Tommy. He jerked his head at the door. “You want breakfast?”

Tommy nodded with a yawn. “That sounds good.”

As Tommy reached out, grabbed his prosthetic, and deftly began strapping it to his leg—a process he’d grown quite adept at—Techno took the crutches from where they leaned against the wall. Once the prosthesis was secured, he held them out.

Tommy took them, but hesitated before he pushed himself to his feet. He shot a nervous glance up at Techno. *It was just a nightmare*, he told himself again, for the hundredth time, but that didn’t stop the tiny part of him that expected to see *green eyes and a twisted smile and—*

It was just Techno, staring down at him patiently, waiting for him to stand. Of course, it was just Techno. He was being ridiculous. Tommy took a deep breath and used the support of the crutches to rise to his feet. They made their way to the other room of the cabin, to eat together and then properly start their day.

Far away from the isolated cabin, a now seventeen-year-old president was making his final preparations for his visit to his best friend. Tubbo smiled as he glanced down at the compass

he held, at the needle that pointed resolutely to where he knew Tommy's campsite was.

It was his birthday, and it was going to be a good day.

Chapter End Notes

WE GOT SOME [FANART](#) BY SATURN OF NIGHTMARE TECHNO, IT LOOKS ABSOLUTELY EPIC, GO CHECK IT OUT

things that are transient

Chapter Notes

i'm back o/

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was late morning, now. The sun was high in the sky, steadily approaching its zenith.

Tommy had been uncharacteristically hesitant to walk today but had caved beneath Techno's gentle insistence. Still, the boy was far more cautious than usual and Techno saw but didn't comment on the nervous glances that were occasionally shot his way, accompanied by a spark of fear that cleared after a moment of staring. Techno didn't know what had happened, or what had caused Tommy's renewed wariness, but he didn't want to pry.

Instead, he remained silent from where he leaned against the wall, watching as Tommy hobbled around the edge of the room, one hand hovering a few inches shy of the wall, the other splayed out to his side. Techno kept a critical eye on Tommy's gait and stride, trying to pick what was holding him back and what he could do to improve.

Each step Tommy took was slow and measured, and every time he began to lose balance he would press his hand against the wall, take several moments to steady himself, before continuing. But there was one clear issue, one glaring mistake he was making.

The step, the right foot, the pause. The voices chanted. They had noticed it too.

Tommy stopped and looked to Techno as he cleared his throat.

"Each time you step with your right leg, I can see you hesitate before you properly press your foot against the ground. It's screwing up your pace," Techno said, pushing himself from the wall and gesturing down at Tommy's leg. "Something you've got to accept is that, even though you can't feel it, your prosthetic is *there*. You've got to trust that it's gonna support you as you step down with your right leg because it *will*."

Tommy glanced down at his foot and then back at Techno. He sighed. "I know, Techno. Logically, I know that I'll be fine. But you don't know how weird it is, to have your foot but not be able to feel it. If I step without pausing then it's like... it's like my leg wants to just keep pushing down, and then my knee locks, and I nearly fall over because, well, it *can't* keep going down. And it happens because I can't feel it but it's even worse if I can't *see* it."

Techno inclined his head. "I don't know how it feels," he acknowledged. "But that doesn't mean I can't note the fact that it's what's stopping you from improving."

Tommy scowled. "And that doesn't stop *me* from noting the fact that you're a fucking prick."

Techno allowed himself to settle back against the wall, levelling his brother with a deadpan stare. “Petty, unwarranted insults won’t fix your problem.”

“Ah, but they’ll be funny. So it’s a win in my book.”

“The standards of your book must be unbelievably low for you to find that funny.”

“Literally just shut up.”

Techno raised an unimpressed eyebrow but fell silent, instead focusing on his brother’s steps as he began walking again. Despite the banter, Tommy seemed to be taking the advice to heart, making an obvious effort to relax his stride, which helped even out his pace.

The problem Techno had just noted, of a constant hesitation before putting weight onto the prosthetic, was a recurring one—an instinct that Tommy was having a hard time shaking off. Techno wished he could help in more ways than just words, but couldn’t think of anything better than hoping that constant reminders to loosen his steps and trust in his prosthetic would let Tommy learn to naturally do so.

Tommy reached the corner of the room, the goal of today’s walk, and allowed himself to press his hands against the wall, puffing out a tired breath. “It’s so... draining,” he said, more to himself than anyone. “Just walking across the room, and I feel like I’ve run a marathon.”

“It’s only to be expected,” Techno said, stepping up to Tommy with the crutches in hand. “You’re learning to walk, on one leg, after weeks of not walking at all.”

Tommy began to turn towards him, began to speak, but the words failed in his throat as something caught his eye. A calendar hung innocently on the wall, open to December, but the date it read...

Tommy ignored Techno’s questioning grunt as he stepped carefully over to the calendar, staring silently at the number displayed in bold, black ink.

23.

His eyes were wide.

The 23rd of December.

“Techno,” Tommy said, his voice little more than a whisper. He turned to Techno, his eyes shining with guilt, his words choked with grief. “Techno, it’s Tubbo’s birthday today.”

Techno lowered the crutches. “Oh,” was all he said. He didn’t know what else *to* say.

Tommy bowed his head, clenching his eyes shut. “It’s his birthday,” he repeated. Techno watched silently, not knowing what to do, as the boy leaned heavily against the wall, head ducked low, limbs trembling.

Tommy's hand raised to clutch at his chest, and he started slightly as his fingers closed around nothing but air. He opened his eyes to stare down in horror at his empty hand. It was

as though he had expected something else.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Techno said as Tommy’s breathing quickened. While he knew very little about Tubbo and had rather mixed opinions on him and the fact that he was the president of L’Manberg—a person who had made a conscious effort to rebuild the nation even after Techno’s warnings—now wasn’t the time to let those opinions shine through. Because Tubbo was also Tommy’s best friend (though there had to be *something* going on between them, what with the whole exile), and Tommy needed help.

So Techno set both the crutches and his own personal grievances to the side and placed a gentle hand on Tommy’s shoulder, trying to break him from whatever trance he was falling into. Tommy flinched back at the unexpected touch, his head jerking up to stare at Techno with terrified eyes for a moment before they cleared of their fear and instead filled with the swirling grief that had been present before.

“Techno,” he choked out, folding into the arm that rested on his shoulder. Techno embraced him hesitantly. “Techno, it’s Tubbo’s birthday. It’s Tubbo’s birthday and I didn’t even *realise*. Techno, I— I don’t have the compass. I lost it. I lost the Tubbo compass. It’s not here, it’s gone, it’s *gone*, and I don’t know where I put it, or where it last was, or where I last saw it. Techno I forgot about it. I forgot about Tubbo, his birthday, the compass. Techno I— I can’t —”

Techno narrowed his eyes for a moment before they widened with realisation. Phil had *Techno’s Compass*, a lodestone compass whose needle pointed steadfastly towards his cabin. He could only assume that the ‘Tubbo Compass’ was something similar. And, given how much *Techno’s Compass* meant, a sentimental value that ran far, far deeper than its physical worth, Techno could guess that the ‘Tubbo Compass’ had a similar place in Tommy’s heart.

There had been nothing in Tommy’s hands or pockets when Techno had pulled him out of the pit below his basement, which meant the compass was either lost or still down there. Techno grimaced as memories of his short trip into the cave surfaced, but quickly wiped the expression from his face as Tommy raised his head.

“I forgot about the compass,” he repeated, his voice a mournful whisper. “Techno, I-I forgot about *Tubbo*.”

“Hey, hey, you’re okay. It’s okay,” Techno said gently, feeling a little awkward, unsure of what to do or say. He pulled away from the embrace. “Here, come sit down.”

Tommy nodded silently, his eyes flickering down to stare at his feet, and leaned heavily on Techno as he allowed him to lead him over to the couch and sit him down.

The compass, at the very least, was a problem Techno knew how to solve. There was a defined course of action. He would go into the pit and he would find the compass, or he would go into the pit and it wouldn’t be there. He did not, however, know what to do about the fact that it was Tubbo’s birthday, nor the distress it was causing Tommy.

For now, he would try to get his brother’s mind off the absence of the compass and onto the more productive topic of its retrieval.

Tommy's gaze was firmly fixed on his fidgeting hands, steadily avoiding looking up and facing anything else in the room. Techno knelt before him, settling his hands on his knees, and Tommy's eyes briefly flickered up to meet with his crimson ones before dropping just as quickly back to his hands.

"Tommy, it's okay. It'll be okay. We can find the compass. I'll help you find the compass," Techno said, squeezing his hands slightly. "First, I need you to try and remember when you last had it."

Tommy's brows furrowed as he tried to recall the past weeks. "I had the compass as I walked through the snow," he said haltingly, after a few moments. His tone was full of the hesitance and fear with which he was approaching the topic, these memories. "I think I had it when I was... down there. I think- no, wait, I remember, I definitely had it."

Tommy glanced up at him, and Techno answered his question before he even spoke. "You didn't have the compass when I carried you out."

Tommy stiffened, paling slightly. "Oh," he said quietly. "So... it's still down there?"

"Sounds like it," Techno said, fighting the repulsion the thought of the cave brought rise to. If his short trip into it made him feel this way, he couldn't imagine how Tommy must be feeling. "Finding it should be easy enough. I can take care of it."

"You're going to... go down there?"

Techno nodded. "Yeah. You don't have to do anything. I'll take care of it." He pushed himself to his feet. "Please, just stay here."

Tommy nodded and pulled his legs up to the couch, hugging his knees to his chest. He watched silently as Techno turned and walked over to the ladder nestled into the corner of the room. Techno climbed down quickly and easily jumped the last few rungs. He crossed over to a chest, pulled out a few lanterns, then heaved aside the stone that covered the entrance from the storage room to the basement and dropped down another floor.

Techno allowed himself a small smile as his cow, Bob, let out a quiet moo of greeting. He stepped over and patted the animal on his head. "Hey," he said. Though the cow didn't possess quite the same uncanny level of intelligence as Carl, he still liked to talk to him as though he did. "This one's not gonna smell very pleasant, I'm afraid. You'll want to hold your breath."

Bob mooed again, butting his head gently into Techno's chest.

"I know. I'm sorry," Techno said, moving his hands to scratch behind Bob's ears and horns, before nudging the cow back. "Look, we can go out later today. You can see the bees. Sound good?"

Bob huffed out a third, decisive moo, then took a few steps away from Techno, who turned and cast his apprehensive gaze over to where he knew Tommy's pit was hidden. He had covered the entrance of both the ladder shaft and his hastily carved staircase with slabs of

stone, to stop the stench from spreading throughout his house, but had otherwise resolved to ignore its presence entirely.

Each time he considered doing something about it, he had told himself, *I'll deal with it later*. Weeks had passed, and it was finally later.

The first thing Techno did was shrug his cape off his shoulders and set it to the side. It was, at the very least, one thing he could prevent from getting dirtied by what he was about to do.

He then knelt down, took and held a deep breath, and pulled aside the stone slab covering the ladder, deciding that he would take advantage of the ease-of-access offered by the direct drop down to help make this trip as quick as possible. Techno grimaced as he peered into the darkened cave that was revealed, practically able to *feel* the miasma that emanated from it, that seemed to wash over him like a dense, physical cloud. Even without inhaling, it was revolting. He dreaded the moment he would have to take a breath.

Moving quickly, Techno withdrew one of his lanterns and dropped it into the hole, trusting that its craftsmanship would let it survive the fall. It landed with a solid, clanging squelch that echoed up through the tunnel, and lit the cave in a dull yellow glow. Techno stared at the pit that yawned out below him.

He didn't want to go down.

He *really* didn't want to go down.

But this compass was the one solace he could offer Tommy.

So Techno clenched his jaw and, foregoing use of the ladder—he was prioritising speed over anything else—leapt down the shaft and into the literal shithole below. The impact shot through his legs and they buckled to compensate for the force, but he was able to steady himself without much difficulty.

The shiver that ran through Techno's body was an instinctive reaction to the chill that had, if anything, only intensified since his last visit. He cast a quick glance around the cave and had to resist the urge to gag. The second shudder that ran up his spine was one of disgust and not cold.

EW, said the voices. It was a rather apt summary.

The layer of muck that coated the rough ground had only grown thicker and denser, and now made a repulsive squelching sound as Techno shifted on his feet. The air hummed with the low buzz of some sort of insect. The chest that Tommy had shoved into the corner had colonies of mould spreading along its surface and there was a bundle of wool lying on the ground, soaked in so much filth that it was a dark grey-brown colour, that almost seemed to have pale maggots worming away inside it.

Techno found himself unable to shake off the pit of nausea that settled deep in his stomach. It wasn't so much the cave itself, rather the fact that this awful place was where his brother had spent *days* before Techno had found him, utterly alone, surrounded by this crushing dark and

biting cold, plagued by illness and infection, quite literally rotting away as frostbite turned into gangrene and ate through his leg.

Techno had never stopped and taken the time to truly appreciate how horrific Tommy's situation had been. Now that he was here, confronted with the reality of it... he wasn't sure how Tommy had survived long enough to even be found.

Techno raised a hand and held it over his mouth and nose, wishing he had thought to bring a mask or gloves. With his other hand, he pulled out a second lantern to help brighten the cave further. While it had the rather negative effect of illuminating his surroundings, it would also reflect off anything shiny. His eyes narrowed as he searched for a telltale glimmer of light off metal. He hoped he would be able to find the compass without actually having to dig through anything, but a quick scan of the cave brought him no such luck.

Techno let out the breath he had been holding, pinched his fingers over his nose, and inhaled through his mouth. The air was thick on his tongue. He could practically taste how vile it was. Once he found the compass and Tommy was feeling better, he was going to fill this godforsaken pit with cement.

Techno walked over to the chest and made as little contact as possible with it as he flipped the latch over and pulled it open. Inside were piles of wood, stone and coal that had remained mostly untouched by the rot and mould of the cave. It meant he was more willing to reach into the chest and comb through the resources. The compass wasn't there.

Techno stepped back, snapped the lid shut, and turned to the compass' other obvious hiding place. The bundle of festering wool. He reached out a boot and gingerly toed through it, ignoring the tiny white maggots he could see squirming around inside.

Gross, said the voices. Their chant as Techno searched the cave had been a mixture of 'ew,' 'gross,' and 'yuck,' with the occasional mutter about the compass or comforting Tommy. As always, they were extraordinarily useful. Not that Techno disagreed with them.

Techno narrowed his eyes as he saw the light glimmer off something buried in the wool. He took another breath through his mouth, then crouched down, taking care not to let anything but his boots touch the ground. Reaching out and resisting the visceral urge to cringe back as his skin contacted the wool, he shoved it aside to reveal the iron case of a compass.

The voices cheered.

Techno pulled the compass out and stood, using his thumb to push a grub off its surface. It was grimy and scuffed, caked with dirt and other... less pleasant things, but it still shone dimly in the light of the lantern and was undeniably what he had been looking for. The joy Techno felt was more over the fact that he would now be able to get out of this hellhole than the fact that he had actually found the compass.

He put away the lantern he was holding, picked up the one on the ground, and began climbing back up the ladder. Even though the air of the basement had been sullied by that of the open mouth of the cave, the first breath Techno took after cresting the lip of the tunnel seemed to *taste* good.

He used his boot to shove the stone slab back in place, picked up his cape, then made his way over to the ladder that led to the storage room. On the way, he gave Bob one last pat on the head, before climbing up and walking over to his chests. He packed the lanterns away, pulled out a bucket of water and took a few moments to clean the compass from its shell of grime.

As he cleaned it, Techno began to realise that it was unlike any lodestone compass he had ever seen.

Techno had, while making the *Techno's Compass*, learnt a lot about lodestone compasses and other such tracking devices. His original plan for creating a gift for Phil had been something that actively tracked his location. He had thought perhaps using his DNA would be the key to letting it happen, and had turned to his books to find out more.

It had only been after Techno found that all DNA could track was the status of the person it came from—that is, with the right magic, it could reveal information about their lives and respawns—that he had turned to the more mundane lodestone.

The magic of lodestone compasses was based almost entirely in the lodestone itself and required little to no modification of the compass. Techno didn't quite understand the specifics of it, but he knew that it was the compass' redstone reacting with the lodestone's netherite, which was in itself affected by the intricate runes and enchantments that were imbued into the stone bricks it was set into. It was complex, convoluted magic, but in it was something that drew the needle away from the magnetic north and towards the lodestone.

Making a compass that tracked anything but a lodestone was damn near impossible, as it was only that fragile connection between the redstone and netherite combined with the magic embedded into the stone, all very delicate and finicky things, that let it work.

All of this was why the fact that this compass—*Your Tubbo*, as proclaimed by the engraving on its case—was so strange. The topside of it was clear but for the words, its name. It was the underside that drew Techno's attention.

Embedded in its centre was a small chip of something that, if Techno didn't know any better, he would have sworn to be netherite. While he didn't know what else the dark metal could be, the prospect of it being netherite, the most valuable resource out there, was absurd. Engraved around that chip were various symbols, minuscule and obviously carved with the utmost care, many of which Techno recognised only due to the fact that he had, in the process of creating *Techno's Compass*, had to make a lodestone himself.

They were runes of magnetism and attraction. The same things Techno had carved into the stone around his lodestone's netherite core, but with slight modifications—almost as though they had been adapted to better suit a material other than stone.

Almost as though they had been adapted to better suit a material like iron.

If Techno were to hazard a guess, he would say that the compass was somehow a lodestone in and of itself, a concept he had only ever dreamt of. It shouldn't be possible, but with each moment Techno spent further inspecting the runes he became more it was the case, something that implied the presence of far more complex magic than Techno had expected or even knew

of. He was intrigued, and the scholar within him wanted nothing more than to pick the compass apart, to disassemble it, learn how it worked and how to recreate it.

But he knew he couldn't do that. This was Tommy's, and the entire reason he had retrieved it was to help him.

He would return the compass, wouldn't ask any questions about it or its creation. At least, not until after Tommy had calmed. Give Techno a few days and he wasn't sure he would be able to stop himself from grilling Tommy about the compass' inner workings.

But that would be then. For now, Techno dunked the compass in the bucket of water one last time, carefully scrubbed it free from the lingering traces of dirt that clung to its case, and then set off towards the ladder that led back to the surface.

He had a compass to give to its rightful owner.

-0-

Tommy waited, perched on the couch, his eyes clenched shut, his head buried in his knees. His grief hadn't let up and his mind was still crowded by the thoughts of Tubbo and memories of all the times they had spent together. He briefly wondered whether Tubbo was thinking of him, but quickly abandoned that train of thought. The act of exiling him and the subsequent lack of visits had made it painfully clear what Tubbo thought of him. Pondering over it would only make Tommy feel worse.

So instead, he wondered what Tubbo was doing. He hoped he was having fun, celebrating with Ranboo, Quackity, Fundy, all the other citizens of L'Manberg who would attend Tubbo's party where they hadn't been bothered to even drop into Tommy's. Maybe Wilbur was there, too. He probably cared enough not to mess up *those* invites.

The bitterness that had begun to rise was swept away as he remembered the revelations that had been made earlier in the morning, of Wilbur's apparent disappearance and everyone else's lack of knowledge. The idea that people hadn't visited him because of hatred and apathy was one that had been drilled into Tommy's head countless times by Dream. The possibility of that *not* being the case was one he was still having a hard time wrapping his head around.

Had they truly not known where Logstedshire was? Was that the reason he had received no visitors? And if that were the case, then why had Dream put the time and effort into orchestrating it all?

Tommy felt a strange sense of foreboding as he thought of it—a tiny, niggling feeling that told him he was missing something, that he had forgotten something. But as was the nature of memories, it is impossible to know whether you *don't* know something, and his exile was an experience that had merged into one long blur of pain, misery and loneliness that Tommy had no desire to dig into. Surely, if it had been something truly important, he would remember it.

And... what about Tubbo? Had *he* not known where Tommy was?

Tommy wanted to believe that, wanted so desperately for it to be true, but he knew it wasn't. Even though the public may not have been privy to his location, Tubbo was the president. Tubbo was the one who had ordered the exile. Tubbo must have known where he was. He had known and decided not to visit.

The sound of heavy footfalls against the rungs of a ladder was all that saved Tommy from the roiling tide of emotion that had threatened to wash back in. He looked over to where he knew Techno would emerge, waiting with nervous anticipation to see what he had or hadn't found.

When Tommy saw the small upturn of Techno's lips, he let out an involuntary breath of relief. When Techno reached into his pocket and withdrew a compass, he felt a final, unknown tension drain from his shoulders.

Techno had found it.

Tommy still didn't understand how he had managed to forget about the compass. It had been a near-constant source of comfort during his exile, something that had almost completely survived Dream's wrath as well as Tommy's own emotions.

Dream had taken it, once. Tommy had been so sure he would never see it again, so to have it returned afterwards, unharmed but for a small chip of metal and a new set of engravings on the underside of its case, had been a massive surprise and had swamped him with an overwhelming sense of gratitude towards Dream.

Tommy had nearly destroyed it, once. In the aftermath of the beach party, he had gone to the nether, held it over lava, been prepared to drop it. Dream had talked him out of it, though. Convinced him to keep the compass close and safe and made him swear to never let it go. At the time, Tommy hadn't questioned Dream's strange insistence, but looking back... the act had been an odd, uncharacteristic one.

The scraping of a chair broke Tommy from his thoughts. Techno now sat before him, proffering the compass.

"It was down there," Techno said. "It seems you remembered correctly."

Tommy took the compass reverently, held it in hands that trembled ever-so-slightly. He stared down at it, at the familiar words etched on its surface, and felt the backs of his eyes burn. He brought the compass close to his chest, looked up at Techno, considered thanking him, then decided that he had been sappy enough over the past few days.

So he took a breath, tried not to think about the way it shook, and said, "You smell like shit."

Techno stared at Tommy for a moment, taken aback by the unexpected impudence, before letting out a snort. "Well, yeah. I would."

Tommy hummed in agreement, ignoring the tightness in his throat and the way his knuckles were white where they were clasped around the compass. "Yeah. Did you know it's gross? You're gross, Techno."

Techno inclined his head gracefully. “Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment, dumbass.”

“Ah, but you see Tommy. I know that you truly have a heart of gold beneath all your... *you*, and that what you meant to say was, ‘Technoblade, you did something undesirable for me that, as a result, made you smell rather unpleasant. Thank you for going through that for my benefit, I will be forever indebted to you due to your sacrifice.’”

“Well, that’s just fucking stupid.”

Techno raised an eyebrow. “Okay, Tommy. I’m glad you think so.”

Tommy ducked his head, blinking hard to clear his eyes. “I *do* think so.” The bravado and humour that coated his words and shielded them from his true emotions, a defense mechanism that had been suspiciously absent over the past days, was wearing thin.

Techno stared at Tommy for another long moment before huffing out a breath and pushing himself to his feet. “Well, I’ll leave you to it then,” he said. “After all, my staying here is only allowing the stench to spread.” The lightheartedness of his words contrasted the concern that lined his tone.

“Yeah, you do that,” Tommy muttered. His eyes shone treacherously as he raised them to meet Techno’s worried gaze. There was a slight furrow in Techno’s brow and the corners of his mouth were tight with apparent displeasure. He seemed to be debating whether or not to speak.

After a moment of silence that hung heavily in the air, Techno cleared his throat, nodded once—a silent acknowledgement of the underlying message of Tommy’s brash words—and turned towards the door. “Shout out if you need anything.”

As Techno reached out to the handle, Tommy felt only a moment of hesitation before he said, quietly and genuinely, “Thank you, Techno.”

Techno looked back, met his eyes, and inclined his head in another wordless acknowledgement. He stepped out and pulled the door shut behind him, leaving Tommy alone in the silence he’d been subtly asking for.

After a moment, Tommy flicked the latch that held the compass closed and watched as the case popped open, revealing its true face and the needle that pointed unwaveringly towards his home—if L'Manberg could even be called that anymore. It was then, as he stared down at the treasure held tightly in his hands, that Tommy finally allowed himself to cave, allowed the dam holding back his emotions to fall. He crumpled around the compass, clenched his eyes shut, took a deep, shuddering inhale. Tears broke surface tension and spread like wildfire until his breaths were hiccuped by sobs.

Tommy hated crying. He hated it and the fact that he had done it so much over the past weeks. It was shameful and unbecoming, and the action itself always brought up both fresh and old trauma he was in the process of pushing down and burying.

The worst part of it all was that he kept doing it, kept embarrassing himself like that, in front of *Technoblade* of all people.

He wasn't a child, he wasn't weak, and yet here he was, relying on Techno like some sort of helpless puppy. He wanted to become more independent, wanted to prove to Techno, to *himself*, that he didn't need the help he continued to receive. And yet he kept breaking apart and Techno kept having to be the one to pull the pieces back together. Over a nightmare, a birthday, a compass.

It was humiliating.

Tommy's fingers ghosted over the words engraved into the iron case. *Your Tubbo*.

He missed Tubbo.

Tubbo was someone Tommy was never afraid to be genuine around. Tubbo was someone he could cry into the shoulder of without fear of judgement or shame. Tubbo was someone he would trust with his life, his soul, his every secret.

Tubbo was Tommy's brother in all the ways his real family fell short.

Tubbo was...

Tubbo was someone who would exile him.

Tubbo was someone who would tear away Tommy's life and livelihood, who would cast him away and leave him in the clutches of Dream, of *Dream*. Tubbo was someone who wouldn't visit him, wouldn't *think* of him, who would leave him to rot away, alone and afraid, while he lorded over his perfect nation.

'*Government corrupts*,' was what Techno had said.

Tubbo was someone who had been corrupted.

Tommy's fingers dug into the compass' case. He stared down at it, his eyes hardening, his lip curling into a sneer. It was just a fucking compass. All it did was point to a place he would never be able to return to. The only purpose it served was as a taunting echo of everything that had been torn from him.

His damn discs were worth more than it.

Tommy lifted his gaze to the fire. Bitterness bubbled in his throat, choking his rational mind and bringing him to a harsh, rash decision. He raised his arm, pulled his hand back, aimed for the fireplace, and—

And dropped his hand back to the side, clenching his eyes shut and burying his head into his knees.

He couldn't burn the compass.

He was too weak to do something like that.

Tommy sat there, curled in a protective ball, fingers wound around the compass that he hated, that he loved, that he relied on. His only companion was the soothing crackle of the flames that was oh-so discordant with the raging of his turbulent emotions. Tears leaked from behind closed eyelids, dripping down his cheeks and soaking into the thick fabric of his pants. The sound of the fire was soon drowned out by the heaving, hiccuping sobs that bubbled up Tommy's throat and forced themselves from his lips.

Memories of times long since gone by rose unbidden, their joy and carefreeness sullied by the lens of future knowledge Tommy was looking at them through.

They only made him cry harder.

-o-

Far away, a president stared in horror up at the tower of blocks that loomed over the crater of a campsite. A basket, full of food, resources and gifts, slipped from numb fingers. The cake he'd baked, a celebratory token of his birthday, splattered against the ground.

"Surely not," he whispered, his voice breaking.

The now seventeen-year-old dropped to his knees, one hand clamped tightly over his mouth to hold back the sobs that clawed at his throat, the other reaching up to clutch the compass hanging around his neck in a white-knuckled grip.

Tubbo lowered his head to the grass. Silent tears poured down his cheeks.

Surely not.

Chapter End Notes

if you don't know, that last part is a *direct* retelling of this [this](#) scene. also, tubbo's compass is pointing to a lodestone ghostbur set up in logstedshire and not tommy's compass.

anyway i'm back at in-person school now so updates will probably continue to be really fuckin slow

interlude - death

Chapter Summary

Wilbur's eyes widened in pain, and Phil's mouth opened in a silent scream, and he knew the exact moment the blade contacted skin, could feel it in the sudden weight and resistance against the sword, could see it in the renewed tears that sprung to Wilbur's eyes.

And there was too much force, too much momentum, and everything was moving too quickly, and suddenly Wilbur had collapsed against him, and there was a hand clutching at the back of his cloak, and Phil could feel his son's shoulders shaking with sobs, could feel warm, sticky blood on his hands and he couldn't breathe, could barely think through the waves of pain and guilt and regret that crashed down on him.

This couldn't be real.

Chapter Notes

Update: this was written before the retcon that revealed that Phil has been alive for centuries and also is married to the goddess of death. So here he's literally just some dude lmao.

Anyway remember kids, it was the spider and not the baby zombie that killed Phil in his hardcore world.

Chapter-specific warnings for spiders, suicide, canonical character death and discussion of death (we get a lil introspective)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Death.

It is an abstract concept, one that is difficult to grasp and even harder to understand.

Where do we go, once our bodies give in? What happens to *us*, the sparks of consciousness that are physically nothing more than chemicals and electric signals but are, in reality, so much more; unexplainable feats of nature that are simply snuffed out once the body we are contained in ceases to function?

Would it be too cynical to answer those questions with a 'nowhere' and a 'nothing?'

In worlds where everyone lives with one life, death is feared and reviled, something to avoid, to take precautions against, to ward off as superstitious folk might do to spirits and curses.

In worlds where everyone lives with three lives, where, even after one's final life is taken, there is potential to come back, true death is practically unknown. It seems far less real, far less substantial. It is often regarded as a joke, a horror story, is rarely acknowledged as the looming, inevitable reality it is.

In worlds like this, where the weight death holds on the minds of its inhabitants is far less than it really should be, the occurrence of it, when it comes with the permanence of a person's third life being taken, well...

It hurts, but it is never just the pain that comes from loss.

It is a pain that comes from shock and horror and the sharp reminder that, even to those that live with the contentment of three lives, there is an end—that there will always *be* an end.

It is a pain that comes from fear of a concept that is unfamiliar and unacknowledged and that will fade back to a looming obscurity once the grieving process ends.

It is a pain that comes from the unknown.

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Death.

It was something that had always terrified Philza.

He was a hybrid living with one life in a world of those that lived with three. His circumstance was one he kept close to his chest, one that he divulged to no one but those closest to him. The mark on his neck—a single heart rather than the three tally-like marks of others—was one he explained away as a protective measure, an act of paranoia, a tattoo he had gotten over his tally marks to hide his true number of lives from prying eyes. In reality, it was a sign of the condition of his existence, the existence he lived in but shared with none—an existence where he had never died and yet a single fatal mistake would spell his end.

He had had many close calls, in his younger years. Back then he had been careless and daring, confident to the point of arrogance. He would go into the nether with nothing but iron armour, would challenge himself by fighting the strongest mobs he could find, would go caving and exploring with minimal gear and unsuitably enchanted armour.

The closest he had ever come to death had been while travelling an embarrassingly mundane cave. There was a golden rule of mining, one that even Phil, stupidly bold as he had been back then, always followed. It was why he preferred mining in the comfort of well-lit strip mines than risking ventures into caves and ravines. Never leave your back unprotected.

It had been an encounter with a zombie, of all the stupid things. A baby zombie that had gotten its rotten little hands on a suit of enchanted golden armour, though that undead monster had only been part of his near-death experience.

His strip mining had led him to the cave, and the only thing that had stopped him from immediately blocking up the entrance had been the glimmer of exposed diamonds he spotted by a lava pit. The zombie had been meandering around the edge of the pool and Phil had leapt at it unthinkingly, striking the corpse with a blow that unbalanced it enough for him to shove it into the bubbling lava. He had considered himself done, considered the zombie just one more dead monster among the sea of others he had slain.

The world had decided otherwise, though, and from the unlit depths of the cave had come a colossal spider, leaping down from a darkened ledge and onto his exposed back, latching its clawed legs onto his unarmoured wings, burying its pincers into an unprotected portion of his neck; right on top of the heart-shaped mark of his single life.

His armour, enchanted as it had been, had had its flaws. After this encounter, he had taken to wearing a chainmail undercoat to protect his neck and joints in the areas armour had to remain uncovered in order to allow for movement.

In the moment Phil had panicked, pupils blown wide, heart pounding in his throat. He had staggering backwards, shaking his shoulders, flaring his wings out, trying desperately to dislodge the beast from his back. The spider had remained unaffected, shifting its weight slightly to account for the movement but otherwise remaining firmly in place. The pain from the puncture wounds had been swiftly replaced by an icy numbness that spread from his throat, and Phil had felt himself slowing, his actions becoming uncoordinated and sluggish as he tried to escape, his racing heart only serving to quicken the rate at which the venom spread through his body.

It had been sheer, dumb luck that had saved him. He had given into the venom and collapsed, too weak to put up any more of a fight. When he landed it wasn't against the floor but instead a rocky wall he had been unknowingly stumbling towards.

The impact had been enough to dislodge the spider, sending it careening from its position and toppling into the lava Phil had fallen dangerously close to. He had retained enough of his wits to dig a shaking hand into his pocket and pull out a golden apple, the healing properties of which had been the only thing that had saved him from the paralysis that would have otherwise set in, that would have left him easy prey for whichever monster wandered into the cave next.

Had anyone else shared his experience they might have laughed it off as just another close call and forgotten about it, remaining content in the fact that even if they had died, it would've been just one of their three lives.

It had stuck to Phil, though. Stuck in the form of a terrifying memory and the twin scars the pincers had left, right over the heart on his neck. Right over his life.

He had never looked at spiders quite the same way.

Now, he took far more care before diving into anything that could be considered reckless. When venturing into a dangerous situation, he did so with a plan and supplies and skill that far surpassed what he knew he would be facing. A caving trip in an area he knew was safe

needed, at the very least, diamond armour and weapons. Going to the nether required nothing less than fully enchanted netherite.

He also rarely fought honour. When Phil fought, he did so with every dirty trick he knew, every card he held up his sleeve, every subtle tactic and deceitful maneuver he knew how to pull off. Maybe it was shameful—there would definitely be people who would sneer and curl their lips at it—but he couldn't do anything else, couldn't *afford* to do anything else. For him, the stakes of every fight was his life, his single life, and life was something Phil valued over nearly everything in the world.

And yes, maybe at times he went overboard.

But it was this mindset that had kept him alive.

And it was this mindset that he had, almost unconsciously, imparted to sons.

Even though they had three lives, even though Phil *knew* they had three lives and was reminded of the fact every time he saw the tally marks on their necks, he couldn't help but think of it as though they had just the one. Living with a single life had been his experience since the beginning, and people are remarkably good at projecting their experiences onto others, even when it's not applicable. Even when it's actively wrong.

Phil instructed them on handling weapons far earlier than many would but still waited years before taking them venturing into caves or the nether. He drilled the theory of everything into their minds before letting them do anything dangerous in practice. When he taught them to fight he did so with his own dirty style, one that had a single goal: survival.

He had taught them that losing any of their lives was something to be avoided above all else, stressed how important it was to stay safe and careful and away from anything and everything they weren't geared or prepared to handle.

Or, he had tried to.

It had only ever really stuck to Techno.

-o-O-o-

Phil had had no time to react.

One moment Wilbur had been standing before him, talking about his nation and the past and a traitor whose name Phil had never heard, the next he had leapt back, whipped around, and slammed his hand down on the button with a click that spelled out his nation's destruction.

Phil had been unable to do anything but let out a startled cry before the world exploded in a blast of light and heat and sound. He may have shouted, he may have screamed. It went unheard over the TNT's earth-shattering detonation.

The wall of the cave, the one that faced L'Manberg, was just enough to protect Phil and Wilbur from the brunt of the explosion but was unable to remain standing, and there were a few split-seconds where huge, splintering cracks clawed their way up the rock face before it

shattered under the pressure, huge stones and boulders plummeting from what seemed to be the sky and only barely missing the cave's ledge.

Without the shield the wall had offered, there was nothing stopping the explosion's shockwave as it tore through the cavern with sweltering heat and breathtaking strength, effortlessly lifting Phil up and flinging him across the room. His impact with the rocky wall was harsh, one that drove the air from his lungs, sent pain lancing through his body, and had force enough that his neck was snapped backwards and his head slammed against the stone, bringing forward a dizzying burst of stars from behind his eyes.

Phil crumpled against the wall, his ears ringing, his senses filled with dust and ash and smoke. His exposed face and arms burned with a ferocious, stabbing pain and even as he lay there he could still feel the heat from the explosion wafting through the cavern. Everything was blurry, muddled, swimming in and out of focus, leaving him to squint dazedly through the haze that now clouded his surroundings.

Past the cavern's new, gaping hole was a battlefield, slowly being swallowed by the billows of smoke that rose from L'Manberg's smoldering wreckage. There was a landscape, burnt and broken and ravaged by explosions and war and the very presence of humans on its soil. There were fighters, weapons loose in their fingers, staring, slack-jawed and horrified, at the crater of what had once been their nation. There were the unmistakable bases of withers, a figure standing before them, holding a skull in either hand and sporting terrifyingly familiar pink hair.

Phil only had a moment to dazedly take it all in before it was completely hidden by dust and smoke and the blurriness of his own vision.

Wilbur is here, too, something inside him whispered, and it was enough to jolt him from the stupor he had fallen into. Wilbur, his son, the one who had caused this, his *son*, who was probably injured, lying somewhere in this cave, the contents of which Phil could barely make out anymore.

Phil pressed shaking hands against the wall and used it to haul himself to his feet, ignoring the pain that throbbed behind his eyes and lanced through his leg as he pushed himself from the support and staggered forward. His stomach roiled with nausea and there were coughs clawing their way up his throat as he choked on the polluted air that pressed down on him like a physical weight. His head spun and blood roared through his ears. He couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

Outside, the ground quaked with the aftershock of the explosion. Blinded as he was, Phil could still hear screaming, shouts of denial and protest and fear, and he shuddered to think of the casualties the blast must have caused. Then, cutting through it all came laughter—peals of hysterical, unhinged laughter.

Phil could make out nothing but he could tell where the sound was coming from, knew exactly *who* it was coming from, and began stumbling blindly towards its source.

It was only when they stood a few feet from each other that Wilbur came into view past the clouds of dust, leaning heavily against the cave wall, just before where it fell away, staring

out over the destruction he had wrought. He sounded like he was laughing, he *was* laughing, but the shaking of his shoulders looked more akin to sobs.

Wilbur turned, then, and Phil was struck by just how awful he looked. His face was caked by a mask of ash and dirt that was interrupted only by streaks of blood and tears. His hair was filthy and matted and singed from the explosion's heat, and forming along his exposed skin were the raw, blistering beginning of burns.

Wilbur didn't seem to care.

Phil supposed he didn't look much better himself.

"My L'Manberg, Phil," Wilbur said. The words seemed to want to be a shout but ended up as more of a choked whisper. "My unfinished symphony, forever unfinished."

Wilbur swayed dangerously as he pushed himself from the wall, barely able to keep himself on his feet. He reached to his belt and grasped hold of what Phil belatedly realised was a sword. The cave was filled with the metallic rasp of metal against leather a moment before it was illuminated by the dull glow of the blade's enchantments.

Phil watched with bated breath, his body tense and coiled, ready to move at a moment's notice despite the pain in his leg and pounding ache in his head, as Wilbur stared at the shimmering diamond sword he had drawn.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Wilbur said softly, and Phil let out a strangled noise of protest as he ran his hand along the edge of the blade, opening a gash in his palm.

"Wil, what are you-"

"You know," Wilbur interrupted, tearing his gaze quite abruptly from the sword and instead boring into Phil's eyes with a terrifying, feverish intensity. "I was going to ask you to do it, Phil. I still want to, really, but I know what you'll say. I know how you treat life. It's admirable, how much you care." Wilbur smiled, then, a broken expression accompanied by a crack in his voice as he continued speaking.

"I'm on my last life, you know? I'm just like you, dad. I'm just like you but... you were always afraid of death, weren't you? I hated it. I hated *you* for how you treated us, and you know what that led to. But then I realised... it was because of fear, wasn't it?" Wilbur's gaze dropped back to the sword. "I'm not. I'm not scared."

Phil's eyes widened in horrified realisation, and he took a step forward, his hand raising, and he needed to say something, needed to do something, but his tongue felt like lead, weighed down as it was with dread and fear and he could do nothing but watch silently, a spectator in his own body.

"I was always going to die here, dad, and that's okay," Wilbur whispered, his voice choked despite the smile on his lips. "If it wasn't the explosion, then it was going to be me. Or you, but, well. I wouldn't ask this of you."

Wilbur tipped his head up, exposing the neck, baring the single bold, black bar that stood starkly against his pale skin. He hefted the sword up, brought it to his throat, held it flush against his life tally. Phil's heart was still in his chest, his blood frozen in his veins, and he couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, but he *needed* to move, needed to tear the sword from Wilbur's grasp and pull him from the room and away from Manberg, from the land that had driven him to *this*.

Wilbur shifted his weight and swallowed heavily. The bobble of his throat was visible against the blade. He reached his already-injured hand up to the tip of the sword and pressed down until blood dribbled from his throat and his palm. "I'm not scared," he repeated, almost too quietly for Phil to hear, and there it was again, the choked tone, the tiny cry for help buried deep beneath the layers of false confidence and resolve.

Wilbur's arms tensed, and in the moment Phil was overcome by a blind panic, a raw, driving fear so strong he was able to wrench back control over his own body, force himself forward, lunging at Wilbur, tackling him to the ground, heedless of the pain it caused his battered body.

In the future, looking back at this, the worst day of his life, Phil had realised that Wilbur's expression had been one of fear and not resolve, that the tensing arms had been an act of hesitation and not preparation. Had he waited a moment longer, had he been able to see through his blinding, abject terror, maybe he would have recognised it then, wouldn't have acted as aggressively and desperately in his aim to stop Wilbur.

Maybe he would have been able to use his words, to talk Wilbur down from the actions he had already been hesitant to take, to stop everything before anything happened at all.

But he hadn't, and that had been his failure.

Phil began prying Wilbur's fingers from the hilt of the sword, but without his enhanced hybrid strength—he had tucked his wings away as soon as he had crossed L'Manberg's border—Wilbur was able to yank his hands back, kicking his legs out and shoving Phil to the side.

He rolled away as Phil jumped at him again, shoving himself to his feet and whirling around to face him, sword brandished. His eyes were wide and full of a wild frenzy, his chest heaved with a desire for oxygen that the dusty, smoky air couldn't provide, his hands trembled so violently it looked like he could barely keep a grip on the weapon.

"I have to do this," he said, backing away as Phil began advancing on him again until he was pressed against the wall. "I wasn't meant to survive the explosion. I can't live after having pressed the button, I-I can't. I just can't. Please."

Phil didn't even grace him with a response, feigning left then darting right, the distraction just enough for him to shove Wilbur back to the ground. This time he didn't bother trying to loosen the hold on the sword directly, instead grabbing Wilbur's wrist and pulling his arm up and to the side until it was held fast in a stress position.

“Drop the sword,” Phil managed to grit out, digging his fingers into the underside of Wilbur’s wrist. His head spun in protest of the violent movement.

Despite the way his hand still shook, Wilbur’s white-knuckled grip remained strong. He strained against Phil’s hold, doing his damndest to break free.

Phil twisted his arm warningly and felt Wilbur stiffen under him. “Drop the sword,” he repeated, aiming for a commanding tone but instead speaking in more of a broken whisper.

Phil ground his teeth together as Wilbur once again offered no response.

Better an injured son than a dead one.

Phil yanked his arm back and the cave was filled with the sickening crack of splintering bone. Wilbur let out an agonized scream, his grip on the sword slackening instantly, and the moment the weapon began tumbling to the ground Phil relinquished his hold on his wrist, grabbed the sword and tore it away.

He started scrambling across the room, his movements jerky and uncoordinated, the adrenaline coursing through his veins leaving little in the way of rational thinking or motor skills.

Wilbur used his uninjured arm to grab onto Phil’s ankle and pulled, and Phil only barely managed to keep his feet under himself. He twisted, his eyes blown wide, to see Wilbur hoisting himself up, to his elbows then his knees then his feet, his broken arm cradled to his chest, his face twisted into a mask of fear and rage and despair.

“I was going to do it myself, Philza!” he screamed, all lucidity gone from his tone, from his expression, replaced by an intensity offered only by madness and pain. “But if you’re not going to give me that much, then you do it yourself! Kill me! Stab me with your sword! Murder me! Do it, Philza!”

Phil shook his head mutely, his throat far too tight to even consider choking out any words. He took a step back, then another, and as he was taking a third Wilbur’s face twisted into an ugly snarl.

“*Kill me!*” he screamed, surging towards Phil in a move so violently quick and unexpected that it was all Phil could do to jerk the brandished sword to the side, away from Wilbur. But Wilbur hadn’t been aiming at the sword. He had lunged to the side, had angled himself just shy of the blade, wanting to do nothing more than get close to his father. By the time either of them realised what had happened it was far too late.

Wilbur’s eyes widened in pain and Phil’s mouth opened in a silent scream and he knew the exact moment the blade contacted skin, could feel it in the sudden weight and resistance against the sword, could see it in the renewed tears that sprung to Wilbur’s eyes.

And there was too much force, too much momentum, and everything was moving too quickly, and suddenly Wilbur had collapsed against him, and there was a hand clutching at the back of his cloak, and Phil could feel his son’s shoulders shaking with sobs, could feel

warm, sticky blood on his hands and he couldn't breathe, could barely think through the waves of pain and guilt and regret that crashed down on him.

This couldn't be real.

Phil's injured leg finally gave in, buckling underneath him, and as he collapsed to his knees. Wilbur came down with him, and all Phil could do was stare in silent horror at the bloody blade protruding from his back.

He let go of the handle as though he had been burned, as though the action could somehow undo what he had just done, and lifted his hand to instead cradle Wilbur's cheek. In a twist of cruel irony, it was only *now*, after everything had been said and done, that Phil could speak, the sheer horror of his actions enough to unblock his throat. Words, meaningless words of comfort and denial and desperation were pouring from his lips before a thought passed through his pounding skull.

"Wilbur, Wil, hey, stay with me. Stay with me now. Keep your eyes open, hey, it's okay, we're gonna get you out of here, you're gonna be okay, stay with me, hey, hey, you're okay."

Wilbur laughed wetly, the sound quickly contorting into a fit of ugly, hacking coughs, and now there was blood splattered around his mouth and lips and he was burying his head into Phil's shoulder.

"You always told me not to lie," Wilbur whispered, and Phil's heart broke a little bit more.

"No, Wilbur, no I'm not lying. I'm not lying. You're gonna—" it was Phil's shoulders that were shaking, now, racked by heaving cries. Wilbur's were dangerously still. "You're gonna get out of here. I'm gonna get you out of here."

Wilbur lifted his head and pushed himself back slightly, his movements slow and laborious. "Don't blame yourself, dad," he said, ignoring Phil's words. "It's okay. This isn't your fault."

Phil lifted his eyes to stare into Wilbur's half-lidded ones. "Why didn't you- why didn't you stay at home?" he sobbed, drawing his son back into a final, desperate embrace. "Why did you run away? I would have protected you, Wilbur. I would have taught you to fight. I was teaching you to survive. I was- you should have—"

"Yeah," Wilbur breathed out, barely able to speak through his gargling, shuddering breaths. There was blood in his lungs, bubbling up his throat, coating his lips, and both of them knew the inevitability of the situation. "I should have. You were always— you knew best. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, dad."

Phil let out a shrieking, wordless wail of grief, cradling Wilbur close to his chest, and he felt it, the last breath, the last heartbeat, felt his body go limp in his arms, felt his hand drop from where it had been clutching his cloak, and he screamed all the louder because of it.

A battle was waged and fought outside, speeches given, withers summoned, withers slain, and Phil did nothing but sob. He held Wilbur's body close to his chest and wished with immeasurable desperation that it would disintegrate, fade into nothing, that it would be

reformed leagues away, where Wilbur would wake again, where he would live again, where everything would be okay.

It would all be okay.

But Wilbur had said it, had proved it when he had bared that single mark on his throat. He had been on his last life. While Philza had been absent he had lost two of them and upon his return, he had lost his third.

The hammering in his skull grew all the more intense as his adrenaline faded until every inch of him was filled by either a hollow, aching grief or an agonising throbbing that seemed to seep from his skull and into the rest of his battered body.

Black spots scattered across his vision, growing larger and darker until his vision was clouded not only by the dust that hung heavy in the air but the darkened patches that wavered and swam and rolled with no apparent reason or pattern.

Phil lost consciousness before the battle ended.

When the smoke finally cleared, the sight the L'Manbergians were met with was that of Philza's unconscious body kneeling in the dirt, his son's corpse, impaled upon a shimmering diamond sword, collapsed against him and the only thing holding him up.

An explanation was formed.

Philza killed Wilbur as a punishment, is what people said. He got to L'Manberg, failed to stop the explosion, and then murdered his own son in retaliation. They were all too eager to believe it, to condemn Philza for a cold-hearted murder he didn't truly commit, to blame him for his inability to stop the destruction he had had no part in causing.

Because to blame is the nature of humans. Schlatt was dead, Wilbur was dead, Dream and Technoblade had fled in the aftermath of the battle and were untouchable regardless, so the citizens of L'Manberg shoved all their pain and grief and anger onto Phil's undeserving shoulders.

When Phil woke, his head pounded with unforgiving pain and there was a man in a fiery balaclava and pristine lab coat leaning over him. "Oh!" he said, pulling back, his eyes crinkling in a way that indicated a smile. "I was wondering when you were going to wake."

Phil blinked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I'm Ponk," the man—Ponk, apparently—said. "I'm a doctor—though I must admit it's a self-given title." his eyes narrowed, as though in thought. "I've been meaning to get a degree." He leaned forward again, and Phil watched warily as the 'doctor' held something against his head. That didn't seem like something one should tell their patients.

"You're lucky you were found," said Ponk. "Your lungs were full of smoke and ash and you had an intracranial hemorrhage." At Phil's blank look, he elaborated. "Bleeding in your skull, caused by a traumatic head wound. You wouldn't have lasted much longer without the

potions Tubbo administered when he found you—you should thank him for that, by the way—and even then it was a close call. Kid knows his stuff, but battlefield treatment can only go so far. The explosion left some nasty wounds... I've managed to get rid of most of the ones that would scar, but even with potions it'll be a few days before you properly recover."

Found? Phil wanted to ask. *Where was I found? What explosion? Who is Tubbo? Where am I?* But just as the questions prepared to roll from his tongue, he was overcome by the memories of what had happened.

And... *oh*.

Phil was unable to speak in the days that followed the battle.

When he heard of the claims that had been made against him, the explanation that had formed regarding the circumstances behind Wilbur's death, he was in no state to refute them, to disclose what had truly occurred—he was in no state to do anything, really, other than spend the days huddled in a shack in the temporary hamlet that had been built for the duration of L'Manberg's reconstruction.

Once he recovered enough to explain what had truly happened, it was far too late to change anyone's mind.

Phil fled, eventually. Packed up his meagre belongings and left, too overwhelmed by the hateful glares and scathing whispers, the awful reminders of Wilbur, and the need to free his wings from where they were hidden away.

He found Techno in the snow, and after a brief confrontation where Techno shouted at Phil for killing Wilbur and Phil screamed back about summoning withers and decimating an already broken country, they came to a mutual understanding of the position the other had been in.

Phil moved in with Techno, only going back to visit L'Manberg once news of Wilbur's ghostly return reached them. It wasn't been easy, seeing the ghost of his son. The first time they encountered each other Phil's heart stopped, his throat constricting as he forgot how to breathe. Then Wilbur darted towards him with a cheerful shout of "dad!", and his face had broken into a wide smile the likes of which Phil hadn't seen in—

He didn't remember how long it had been since he'd seen Wilbur smile like that.

Wilbur's spirit—Ghostbur, as he liked to be called—trailed after him for the rest of the day. Their interactions forced Phil to come to the sharp realisation that it wasn't Wilbur, not really. He didn't know much about souls or ghosts, not when research only made him bitter about his own stunted lives and brought up memories of some of the rather unpleasant experiences he'd had with those who experimented with immortality, but it was painfully clear that Ghostbur was nothing more than an echo, a shell, with so much of what made him *him* lost to the afterlife or compartmentalised for the sake of the ghost's own sanity.

The realisation somehow managed to both worsen and lessen the pain.

Ghostbur knew little of his own death, admitting that he remembered nothing prior to Phil holding him as he passed. His return had, however, gone far in helping mend Phil's reputation within L'Manberg's citizens. To them, apparently, filicide wasn't so bad when the victim's spirit was still around.

Interesting morals, there.

Phil purchased a house in the rebuilt nation but only visited occasionally, no longer than a week at a time due to the need to hide his wings and the hostility he still received, though the latter may have been paranoia.

He began building a relationship with Fundy, the son he had never known Wilbur had had (he was sure there was a story there) and whose aging, altered for all hybrids, had apparently been sped up. There were precious few other explanations for why the fox hybrid was more than a bundle of squalling two-year-old.

Phil's relationship with Tommy was something he was unable to salvage.

He couldn't help but notice that his youngest constantly wore a green bandana around his neck, an apparent symbol of connection with Tubbo, another person Phil had the pleasure of meeting, who wore a matching red bandana, but also something that served to hide his life tally from the outside world.

Phil wondered how many lives Tommy had left, but it was no longer his place to know.

He learned, eventually. Learned through books and conversations and Ghostbur's idle chatter. Learned of the revolution and the election and the festival. Learned of a betrayal and a duel and an execution. Learned of the nation's violent, bloodstained history.

Learned of the lives Tommy had lost, that Wilbur had lost, that everyone in the nation had lost.

And it hurt, hearing of all his sons had gone through while he wasn't there to see them through it. But there was nothing to do but mend, or at least attempt to mend, the bridges that had been burnt.

One thing he kept close to his chest, however, was his continued contact with Technoblade. When posters calling for his arrest were posted around L'Manberg, Phil nearly laughed. He wasn't sure what this ragtag community thought they could do against his son but decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

When he relayed the information to Techno, his son found it similarly hilarious.

Things were far from perfect, but Phil was surviving.

He was surviving, and that was what mattered.

it was never meant to be o7

[THIS CHAPTER HAS A COVER!!!](#) IT'S BY TIMX AND IS SO COOL
EPIC [FANART](#) BY KURO, OF THE DEATH SCENE

how a heart shatters

Chapter Summary

No parent should have mourn the death of their child and yet here he was, doing it a second time. Here he was, burying a second son.

Chapter Notes

okay so in this chapter i set up somewhat of a timeline of all the preceding events (like the l'manberg war and election and stuff) and just... please suspend your disbelief a bit? especially regarding the ages of people?? mainly fundy??? the timeline is already just canonically so fucked up so while i tried my best there's really only so much that can be done

chapter-specific warnings for considered s/h and a misunderstanding over an implied suicide

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Phil woke on the morning of the 23rd, he was prepared for a dull, monotonous day. Those words were, of course, rather apt descriptions of prison life in general, but they were broken up by Tubbo's visits. Visits that provided company, which added a spark to the sea of grey, that he was able to look forward to, to distract him from... everything else.

Today, however, Phil wasn't expecting any visitors. Tubbo was going to Logstedshire to see Tommy, and over the course of his incarceration there had been no one else thoughtful enough to come by him—not that there was anyone else in L'Manberg he would particularly want to see.

It meant he was going to be spending longer alone than he ever had during his imprisonment. The very thought of it made his wings twitch with the urge to curl around him, as though they could somehow stave off everything that made itself known when Phil was left with the company of nothing but his own thoughts.

Breakfast was delivered, as usual, by some unrecognisable, faceless guard. Like clockwork, it happened at the same time each day and by this point, it was almost muscle memory for Phil to push himself to his feet, cross the cell, and pick up the tray. He sat against the wall, picked up the spoon, and pushed it sullenly around the bowl his food had come in. He grimaced. Cold, soggy oats. Again.

Absolutely fantastic.

Occasionally, when Tubbo visited, he would sneak food in with him. Never anything truly substantial—*“I wish I had more but... Quackity doesn’t really let me bring anything at all. He doesn’t know I even have this.”*—but still something that differed from the bland, unappetising mush that he was otherwise served.

That wasn’t going to happen today.

Phil ate the food slowly. It was tasteless and had a texture comparative to that of regurgitated cat food, just like everything else he was delivered, but he knew that, once he was done, there would be nothing else to take up his attention.

And when there was nothing else to take up his attention, he was left to his thoughts. And his thoughts...

Well, they were something Phil would rather avoid.

Inevitably, though, he finished the meal. Phil pushed the tray back under the cell door and retreated back to his previous position, wishing for something, *anything* to do, to fill his hands with, even just something to *look at* that differed from the cell he had become far too familiar with.

His fingers itched with the longing for something to do.

Phil spread his right wing out, curled it around himself, and lifted a hand to card it through the feathers. The urge to tug at them, to pick his feathers apart, to pull them from his wings—it was strong, almost overpoweringly so. An avian instinct, a coping mechanism, unhealthy as it was, to deal with stressful situations.

Phil grit his teeth and lowered his hand back to his lap. The broken chain connected to the manacle rattled dully. He couldn’t, not with the visible proof the action would leave. The feathers scattered on the ground, the bare patches on his wings, the blood that would spill from the wounds. Tubbo... he didn’t need to see that. He didn’t need the added stress.

Phil groaned and buried his head in his hands.

The only thing he had asked Tubbo for was the removal of the clamps on his wings. There was so much more he wanted—better lighting, blankets, books, any form of comfort or entertainment—but he never asked, knowing that Tubbo would almost certainly not be able to supply any of it and that it would only serve to make him guilty.

He let his hands drop back down, stared down at his wrists, at the broken manacles that were still, after all these days (had it been weeks, yet? He didn’t know. It was the 23rd but... what date had he been arrested? How long had passed? Time was losing its meaning), wrapped around them. Maybe, when Tubbo got back, he would ask for a second thing. Surely the president would be able to access the key that kept the bands locked around his wrists.

He had broken the chain connecting them all those days (weeks?) ago, during his bout of desperate rage as his wings had been bound. Since then, no one had thought to remove them and they remained on his wrists, to weigh down his hands, to rub the skin from his wrists, to send sparks of pain shooting through his arms every time he moved too sharply or suddenly.

It was the sort of thing that drove in just how fucked up L'Manberg's laws and regulations were.

And yet he had found, over the endless hours, that it was also the sort of thing that he had grown used to. When things got really bad, when he reached the lowest of his lows, the sharp, stabbing pain was almost grounding. A burning reminder that as bad as things were, he was real. He was there.

They were facts that managed to get lost amongst the endless hours that stretched between Tubbo's visits.

Phil shook his head, pushed himself to his feet, started pacing the cell. His wings flexed and flared, the feathers fluffing up and pressing down in mindless, repetitive motions. It was pointless, but it was better than remaining idle.

It helped drive back the thoughts that threatened to swamp him.

Even so, he was unable to completely stop the emotion that dug its icy fingers into the fissures of his mind and began pulling, tugging at the hanging threads of fear and hopelessness and despair, dragging out everything he tried so desperately to bury.

Phil was no stranger to being alone. He had spent years of his life alone, with nothing but the company of the pets he tamed and the mobs he captured. Alone he could handle. Building, mining, farming—Phil had a world and he knew how to fill it.

But the loneliness he had experienced ever since his incarceration, it was new. It was something Phil had never had to deal with. And, as the days stretched on with nothing but visits from Tubbo, who could only stay for a few hours at most, it had become apparent that it was something he *couldn't* deal with.

Phil had thought there was nothing that could possibly be worse than the weeks that followed Wilbur's death, but this imprisonment and everything that came with it... in so many ways, it was worse than grief. Because this was endless. He had had no trial, no semblance of a real sentence. No mention of parole or eventual freedom. No timeframe of how long he would be here, drowning in misery and regret, the only thing stopping a complete breakdown being Tubbo and the need to hold himself together for his sake.

Phil hadn't taken the one chance he had of escape. When Tubbo had freed his wings and he had been faced with the choice, he had decided he would rather stay here than break Tubbo's trust. He had tried, once, to use the enhanced strength that came with his freed wings, his unbound hybrid power, to break the bars of his cell. He wasn't even able to get them to budge.

It wasn't looking like there would be any other openings.

Dream had managed to entangle Tubbo in the web of his lies, eliminating any future chances of them staging an escape attempt together, and over all his visits, Tubbo hadn't mentioned the faintest whisper of the only other ally Phil had in the world. Techno.

And here, Phil was torn. On the one hand, he was thankful that Techno hadn't shown up in L'Manberg—the entire reason he was trapped in this godforsaken prison was to keep the country's citizens *away* from him, to keep him safe from those that wished to take his lives. But on the other... well, with everything the way it was, a rescue was the only viable way he could see himself getting out. And if he didn't escape, even with Tubbo's visits, Phil didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

Phil thought back to the burning compass that had landed him here, but quickly shut that train of thought down. Thinking of his mistakes—though he still wasn't sure whether throwing the compass into the fire had been a mistake—would make him spiral from hopelessness to regret, and, as bad as this was, Phil knew that his regrets were worse. His regrets were a yawning void that would, if he wasn't careful, swallow him whole.

So instead, he stewed in his own self-pity.

Eventually and inevitably, a memory surfaced. Strangely enough, it was not a memory of grief nor was it one of regret. It was a memory from a happier time, one from before pain and failure and death. It was a memory from when he had been young and his sons even younger.

-

“Dad! Look what I got!”

Phil glanced up from the longbow he was teaching Techno to string. Tommy, seven at the time, was sprinting towards him, his face stretched into a wide, jubilant grin, his hands clutching the hilt of a finely honed iron sword. Back then, the vast majority of their tools had been iron, as Phil had been too concerned over the safety of his sons to take the days-long trip required to harvest resources like diamond or netherite. Wilbur, eleven, was running after him, his eyes wide, his expression panicked.

Techno groaned as Phil set down the bow and stood. “Really?” he asked. “We haven’t even started.”

Phil silenced him with the raise of an eyebrow and started towards his youngest. “Tommy,” he said, once they were close enough to speak without shouting. He crouched down, his wings fanning out behind him. “Where did you get that?”

“Wilby showed me some hidden chests he’d found!” Tommy exclaimed gleefully, guilelessly, gesturing wildly over to his brother who had stopped a ways off and was bent over, hands on his knees, red-faced and panting for breath. At Tommy’s declaration, Wilbur looked up sharply, something like betrayal flashing in his expression. “He said we could go mining, but I wanted to show you first!”

Phil knew exactly what chests Tommy was talking about. They contained all the weapons and armour he had deemed too unsafe for his sons to handle without his supervision. He raised

his eyes to Wilbur, who seemed to be about to protest but, upon meeting Phil's gaze, looked away.

"Tommy," Phil said, keeping his eyes on Wilbur. "What have I told you about mining? What have I told you about swords?"

Tommy paused for a moment, scrunched his face up in thought, and then shrugged. "I dunno, I wasn't listening."

Phil sighed. "It's too dangerous, Tommy. You've got to wait until your lessons. You've got to wait until I'm there," he said, holding out one of his hands. "Give me the sword, please."

Tommy pouted, lifting a finger to point behind Phil. "But Techno gets to play with swords when you're not there! He gets to shoot arrows! And Wilby had all the swords and you weren't there!"

"Techno is older than you," Phil said patiently. "And Wilbur isn't meant to have access to any weapons." At that, Wilbur scuffed his foot guiltily. "Now, give me the sword."

Tommy glanced back at Wilbur for guidance, but his older brother still had his gaze fixed firmly on the ground. Still, he hesitated, unwilling to part from his trophy.

"Hey," Phil said, adopting a gentler tone. "After I finish teaching Techno, we can have a lesson together. How does that sound?"

Tommy blinked up at him with wide eyes. "Promise?"

Phil smiled. "Promise."

Tommy was grinning again as he hefted up the sword to place the hilt in Phil's hand.

Afterwards, Phil had reprimanded Wilbur. He had also moved his hidden stash of weapons.

The lesson with Tommy had gone well.

-

Phil leaned against a wall, closed his eyes, and lowered his head. Memories like that were, in some ways, worse than the negative ones. As he was now, they served as nothing but a reminder of everything he had lost, of all the ways he had failed.

Phil sunk into a seated position.

He was someone who had failed a lot.

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Techno left home the day after his seventeenth birthday.

Phil protested, begged him to wait another year; another two, but Techno was firm and unwavering in his resolve. He wanted to explore, to learn, to grow, and his desire had grown past what Phil could provide.

Though Phil hated it, though he missed Techno every day he was gone, he wasn't overly worried. Techno had been so insistent upon leaving was because Phil had no longer been able to keep up with him. He had begun to lose more spars than he won, had run out of things to teach, had imparted upon him everything he knew from combat to building to farming—and Techno had learned and retained it with an interest and a passion shared by neither of his brothers.

In the years following Techno's departure, it was just Phil and his youngest sons.

Tommy had always held Technoblade in hero-like regard, dogging in his footsteps, mirroring him in all the ways he could, doing his best to make his eldest brother proud of him—not that Techno, focused, dedicated, downright disdainful at times, ever paid him much heed.

This, Phil thought, was why Tommy was at least somewhat willing to learn what he had to teach. He wanted to one day be able to impress Techno.

And while Tommy groaned and whined and complained, while he was nowhere near as quick or interested in picking things up as Techno had been, he tried. He tried, and Phil could tell that he tried, and in the end, that was what mattered. As long as Tommy was willing to put effort into learning, Phil would be willing to put effort into teaching.

Wilbur, on the other hand, had swiftly abandoned any interest he may have had in learning to survive in the harsh reality of the world, had lost the child-like awe he had once held over the idea of combat and mob hunting and adventure, and flat-out refused to be taught anything he needed to know.

He would rather spend his days in his room, playing the guitar Phil had gotten him for his thirteenth birthday, writing out songs and poetry and speeches, reading about past nations and rulers and daydreaming about becoming one of the charismatic leaders he read about in his history books.

It frustrated Phil to no end.

Wilbur knew the basics of survival, sure. He knew what Phil had managed to teach him when he had been young enough to be enthusiastic. And for many people, many parents, that would be enough. Because they were human, they lived in civilizations, societies, and in groups, not every individual needed to know how to do everything.

But Phil wasn't many parents. Phil didn't live with three lives, and that had led him to have experiences that had shaped him, his stances, his priorities, into something no few others shared.

He wanted his sons to be prepared for the world, to know how to fight off all of the many dangers it held, to be able to not just survive but to thrive, to build and farm and forage and

enjoy doing it all—just as Phil did. But Wilbur thought it was useless and unnecessary and refused to listen to anything he attempted to teach.

And Phil hated forcing his sons to do things they despised. He dragged Wilbur into the lessons, yes, but what he really wanted was to find a way to get him actively interested in learning the skills that would quite literally save his life.

In Phil's experience, practical lessons were always preferred over theoretical ones. Actively going places—whether it be hunting monsters, caving, or simply exploring—was preferred over combat training and sparring in the plains surrounding their house.

Using this knowledge Phil had, on Techno's sixteenth birthday, taken him to the nether for the first time. He had fretted over leaving Tommy and Wilbur alone, but after the residents of a nearby village had assured him they would keep his sons safe, he had gone ahead with it.

Phil thought that, maybe, he could do the same with Wilbur, that he could take him to hell on his sixteenth birthday and that maybe seeing the foreign environments and mobs and vegetation would spark an interest in his middle son. Everything else he had tried with him had been useless, met with glares and protests and a growing resentment that shone through his eyes, his posture, and in every interaction they had. Maybe this would be different.

He wanted to make it a surprise, wanted to keep any hint of his plans away from either of his sons. As such, when he left home in the weeks approaching Wilbur's birthday, to go to the nether alone and gather ancient debris so their trip would be as safe as possible, he let them know nothing of what he was doing. He told Wilbur that he would be gone for a while, that he needed to take care of Tommy, twelve at the time, in his absence. Wilbur's lip curled into a slight sneer and he nodded, shortly, stiffly, before slamming his door in Phil's face.

Phil hovered worriedly by Wilbur's room for a few minutes longer before heaving a sigh and retreating. He left early the next morning.

He planned on forging Wilbur a full set of enchanted netherite gear for his birthday. He would gift the gear to his son, who could then use it on a venture into the nether. It would minimize the risk of the trip—the nether was, after all, a dangerous place, and Wilbur didn't have nearly as much skill as Techno had when Phil had taken him—and would show Wilbur how much he cared. It was, as Phil thought, a foolproof plan.

It took longer than planned to get enough ancient debris. By the time he gathered enough, Wilbur's birthday was five days away. By the time he smelted the debris all down into ingots, in a small base by his nether portal, three days remained. The rush to forge the pre-prepared diamond gear into netherite had led to it having flaws that could have otherwise been avoided, but he managed in the nick of time, finishing on September 13, the day before Wilbur's birthday.

When he returned, the house was empty.

Dread choked him. He dropped the gear bundled in his arms, tore through the house, frantically searching for some sign of his sons. The fireplace was cold, the food lining the pantry untouched and half-spoiled, the beds and tabletops covered by a fine coat of dust. The

most damning piece of evidence was Wilbur's missing guitar. His sons weren't there, and they hadn't been there for at least a few days.

He found nothing but a slip of paper, words scrawled on it in Wilbur's distinctive cursive.

Words scrawled on it that stilled his heart.

Don't come after us.

They had run away. For the first minutes, first hours, it hadn't seemed real. Phil hadn't understood.

Why?

Why would they flee?

The next day, after having travelled to several neighbouring villages and finding no trace of his sons, Phil had realised something.

Maybe there was a lesson to be learned in this. In the fact that they wanted to leave so badly that they would go to these lengths, that they would run without the faintest warning or any sort of goodbye. Maybe it spoke of him as a father.

Phil was someone who made an effort to respect his sons as the individuals they were. He respected their decisions and desires—it was why he had gone to the effort of trying to make Wilbur interested in what he had to teach rather than continuing to just force him to learn, even though that had, apparently, fallen through.

And while he didn't understand why they had run away, maybe all that spoke of was where he had failed, of what had led to this. He simply hadn't understood, hadn't realised the effects of what he was doing. Phil didn't just want his sons to survive, he wanted them to live. He wanted them to live and he wanted them to enjoy it.

Forcing them to learn what they didn't want to, what they despised, wasn't the way to do that.

After that revelation, he found himself unable to put his all into tracking them down. Encroaching thoughts full of doubt and guilt stopped him from making any more than a half-hearted effort.

He had later learned that it had been Wilbur that had been the one to run away, and had dragged Tommy along with him. They had gone to the Dream SMP, a nation that stood an ocean away, that Wilbur had read about, that he had believed held a promise of a new life and a fresh start. They had met people, gained allies, made friends, had lived there in relative contentment and peace for all of two years.

Then they had started a revolution.

A revolution that had taken one of Wilbur's lives and two of Tommy's, that had led to an election that had taken Wilbur's second life and an explosion, a confrontation, an accident, that had taken his third.

Wilbur may not have wanted to learn to fight, but, apparently, he was more than willing to start a nation. He resented Phil for trying to teach him skills that would save him, had gone so far as to run away, but he was more than willing to drag his brother, his friends, his son, into a hopeless war.

Such were the contradictions of humans.

And Phil was sure there was more to it than that, more to the story, more to Wilbur's side of things. He was sure there was more to his reasons behind running away, something more than just Phil's failure. There had to be more to it because if there wasn't it meant he had failed in an immeasurable way. But he didn't know it, he didn't understand, and he was unable to get Wilbur's perspective because he was gone, he was gone and when they finally reunited it was far too late to find anything out.

Such was the nature of miscommunications.

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The creaking of the prison door opening was what snapped Phil from the reverie. He winced as the sound echoed through his skull—he was finding, as the days passed, that he was growing more and more sensitive to any sensations that differed from the dark silence of his cell—and was driven by curiosity to push himself to his feet and make his way over to the bars of his cell.

It had only been a few hours, at most. No one was meant to be here. So why, then, could he hear someone coming down the corridor?

The approaching footsteps were fast and uneven, as though the person was staggering as they walked. If Phil didn't know any better, he could've sworn he recognised the sound and weight of the footfalls, but it didn't make sense. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Tubbo was supposed to be visiting Tommy.

Which was why, when the president barrelled into view, moving on unstable legs, looking as though he had been put through the wringer fifty times over, Phil felt his heart plummet.

Tubbo was a wreck. His eyes, wide and bloodshot and full of wild, unchecked emotion, were locked with Phil's. His face was red and blotchy and the skin around his eyes was raised and puffy, wet with the tears that streaked down his cheeks, that hung from his chin, that splashed onto the rough rock below. His arms were wrapped tightly around himself, but even so, Phil could see the way his shoulders shook and his hands trembled and the instability with which he stood.

Phil clutched desperately at the bars of his cell. "Tubbo? Tubbo what's wrong? Why aren't you— what happened?"

Tubbo's arms tightened around his shaking form, and his wide eyes dropped to the ground. He inhaled deeply, a breath that was uneven and stuttered in his throat and got cut off by a

choked sob. “Phil—” Tubbo’s voice cracked mid-word, and he took a stumbling step forward, reaching out and gripping the bars in an attempt to keep himself upright.

Another shuddering breath. “Phil he—” the words were once again strangled in Tubbo’s throat, the sentence dying before it even began.

Phil reached forward and clasped his hands over Tubbo’s, a tiny, pitiful attempt at physical comfort. It was all he had to offer. The pit of dread that had lodged itself in his throat threatened to choke his own words as he spoke. “Tubbo, hey, look up at me. You need to breathe. You’ve got to breathe.”

Tubbo opened his mouth to speak again but closed it before any words came out. Instead, he shook his head wordlessly and slowly sank to his knees despite the white-knuckled grip he had on the metal bars. It was only once he had dropped to his knees that he truly began to cry, heaving, racking, gut-wrenching sobs that came with the force of a person retching on all fours.

Phil crouched by him, wishing so desperately for a way to break through the bars, to wrap his arms and wings around Tubbo, to do *something* other than sit there uselessly, able to do nothing but wait, whispering meaningless reassurances, supporting Tubbo with words where he couldn’t with anything else.

Once Phil found out what was wrong, he would be able to do more. He would be able to focus his words on what the problem actually was. He would know what it was that needed fixing, what it was that had broken Tubbo in the first place.

He pushed aside the sinking dread in his stomach that told him he didn’t *want* to know, the part of him that refused to consider the possibilities and was contrasted by the part that whispered all sorts of horrible, impossible scenarios into his mind.

They’re not impossible.

Phil grit his teeth and shook his head, as though he was trying to dispel the thoughts from his head. “Tubbo,” he said, the slight shake of his voice betraying the fear he felt. He swallowed heavily. He had to ask. He had to know. He had to find out what Tubbo had seen, what he had learned, that had reduced him to this

But he didn’t want to know. He desperately didn’t want to know. Ignorance was bliss, and right then Phil wanted nothing more than to retain that ignorance.

Phil barely managed to push the two-worded question past the lump in his throat. “What happened?”

He had to know.

The question only served to intensify the sobs that continued to tear themselves from Tubbo’s throat, that continued to tear into Phil’s heart.

Phil swallowed again and, steeling himself against the answer that he was digging for, that he dreaded, repeated the question—louder, firmer, with a command in his voice that he hoped would snap Tubbo from his anguished stupor.

Tubbo's shoulders stilled, his entire frame stiffening in response to the forceful tone. If possible, he seemed to curl further in on himself. He inhaled one last strangled, shuddering breath before he began to speak, choking out words that were barely intelligible but managed to gouge deep scars into Phil's heart all the same.

"Tommy— he... he's not... he wasn't— he's d-*dead* Phil. Because of the exile, because of my decision, he's dead, he died, he's gone and— and it was his last life. It was his last life a- and it's gone because of me, he- he took it because of me. Phil I—" another cry bubbled from Tubbo's throat, cutting off his broken sentences and sending him into another fit of sobs.

But Phil wasn't listening.

Phil couldn't listen.

A loud, persistent pounding drowned out everything else. He could hear it, nearly deafening, roaring in his ears, could feel it in his temples and his wrists and his chest. It was his heart, rattling away at his ribs, sending blood tearing through his veins. His breathing, too, was suffocatingly loud, but even as he inhaled he felt like he couldn't get any air, felt like he couldn't breathe. The ground had dropped away from below Phil's feet and he was falling, he was falling, and his wings were nothing but useless weights on his back, and there was nothing but swirling grief and rage and sorrow and regret, and it was choking him, strangling him, and he couldn't breathe.

Tommy was dead.

Phil lurched forward from where he was crouched, landed heavily on his knees, reached his hands up to tangle them in his hair, pulled at the filthy locks, lowered his head, tried to inhale, to draw air through his throat that had tightened and constricted and that he couldn't breathe through. A scream, a despairing, keening wail that was more avian than human in nature, ripped itself from his chest, forced itself through his teeth, reverberated through his cell and the prison corridor, bounced off the walls and the floor and whipped around the room like a storm.

Tommy was dead.

Phil rocked on his knees. His eyes were burning, his chest and throat were far too tight, his wings were stiff and rigid behind his back. He could taste bile rising in his throat, could feel nausea clawing at his stomach and he was going to be sick, and he was falling, and he was drowning, and he couldn't breathe.

And his son was *dead*.

Phil had failed. He had failed Tommy just like he had failed Wilbur, just like he had sworn to never do again. No parent should have mourn the death of their child and yet here he was, doing it a second time. Here he was, burying a second son.

Phil let out another wailing cry.

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After Wilbur's death, it had taken some time before Tommy had even spoken to Phil.

It had only been after Phil had fled, met with Techno, then come back upon Wilbur's ghostly return that Tommy had faced him again, and even then, every word had been short and clipped, full of grief and rage and blame. That had been when Tommy had taken to referring to Phil by name.

*Phil had asked about it once. Tommy whipped around to face him, his eyes narrow and full of vicious, burning hatred, and spat, "The man who murdered my brother will never be my father, **Philza**."*

Phil flinched back, his breath catching in his throat, his eyes dropping down to his hands that were suddenly crimson and sticky and dripping with blood, with Wilbur's blood, with his son's blood that he would never be able to scrub them clean of. The words hit like an arrow, buried themselves deep into his heart, burned like the venom they had been filled with.

He couldn't explain what had truly happened, couldn't put that day into words, couldn't relive Wilbur's death and what had led to it. Just thinking about it made it hard to breathe. There was no way he would be able to bear discussing it. Even if he had, it wasn't like he would be believed. It wasn't like he would be able to override the narrative that had been crafted and accepted by L'Manberg.

Phil hadn't raised the topic with Tommy again.

He had still tried, for a while afterwards, to fix things between them. Nothing had worked. He could only spend so much time in L'Manberg—the need to keep his wings hidden stopped him from staying any longer than a week—and whenever he tried speaking to or spending time with Tommy he was busy, working on his projects or filling his role as Vice President or even just talking with the friends he had made while Phil had been absent. He did, at least, have the decency to not share the existence of Phil's wings. And, well, the fact that his own son not sharing one of his greatest secrets had made him so grateful... it went to show how much had broken.

All of it had forced Phil to swallow a bitter pill.

The mistakes he had made ran so much deeper than the encounter with Wilbur. It had been years, and he no longer had a place in Tommy's life.

*After Tommy's exile, Phil had tried to gather information on his location. None had been forthcoming. He could have, he **should** have dug deeper. Instead, he had dropped it, keeping half an ear open for anything that came his way but otherwise turning his attention to other matters.*

His reasoning had been that even if he did find out, if he did go to Tommy, he wouldn't have been welcome.

His reasoning had led to his son's death.

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There were tears, now, blurring his vision, pouring down his cheeks. Phil didn't know when they had begun falling. He clenched his eyes shut, lowered his hands until he could dig the heels of his palms into his burning eyes.

There were no words that could be said. Not here, not now, not with the soul-shattering news that had just been delivered. Phil's hope, his worthless hope that had led him to think he could fix things once he knew what 'things' were—it was all gone, replaced by the sharp, stabbing pain of horror and guilt and denial, the latter of which had been swept away by the former two long before it could make its mark.

Phil's fingernails were digging small, bloody crescents where they dug into his scalp. The constant movement of his arms was making the manacles rub against his raw wrists. His entire body ached with weariness and pain that went so much deeper than the physical level. His shoulders shook from the force of the sobs that wracked his form, his wings trembled where they extended behind his back, his chest burned from the force of the emotions that swirled within it.

And yet, he could barely feel any of it.

He could barely feel anything, not physically. His body felt numb.

There was nothing to do but sit and mourn.

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Minutes or hours had passed by the time Phil recovered enough to speak. Tubbo was curled against the far wall, his head buried in his knees, his shoulders no longer shaking. He was still. He had been all wrung out of the emotion that had previously overwhelmed him.

Phil felt much the same.

Now that the initial wave of horror and shock and anguish had passed, all he felt was a hollow, throbbing grief. It hurt in an indescribable way, but was, at the very least, something he was able to think through.

"Tubbo," Phil managed to choke out. Tubbo's response was a tiny tilt of his head, the boy still too devastated to form a proper response but able to show he was listening. "Tubbo you can't... you have to go. You have to... sleep. Eat. Take care of yourself."

The words were what Phil knew he had to say, but they still grated painfully as they passed over his tongue. Because they weren't what he wanted to say. He wanted to sob, to cry—*stay here, don't go, don't leave me alone, please stay*. But that wasn't what Tubbo needed.

Phil was trapped here. Tubbo was not.

Tubbo lifted his head slowly, laboriously, until he was staring at Phil with red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. He took a breath and said, his voice little more than a whisper, “I don’t... I can’t... where do I go? Who do I go to?”

Phil’s gaze dropped to the ground. Tubbo was right. L’Manberg was a nation that held few friends of his. There was Dream and Quackity and Fundy and... “could you go to Ranboo?”

Tubbo lowered his eyes again, shook his head jerkily. “I... I used to be able to. I could tell him stuff, I talked to him like I talk to you. I talked to him *about* you. But... he’s changed. I think... I think it’s been since Dream arrived. I—” Tubbo buried his head back into his knees. “I don’t know why, but he’s different. He’s different. I can’t go to him.”

Phil swallowed. He had to think. He had to keep Tubbo safe.

No one in L’Manberg was safe. No one in L’Manberg...

Phil’s eyes widened as the faintest seed of an idea was planted in his mind, in a corner dammed off from the flood of grief that swamped everything else. He had been too hesitant to suggest something like it in the past, too worried about the consequences of what would happen if it was taken the wrong way or Tubbo tried to do it and was caught.

But gone was the time for caution and hesitance. Everything had fallen down around him, shattered into a thousand pieces, and there was one thing Phil could do to gather them together.

He had failed Wilbur. He had failed Tommy.

He wouldn’t do the same for Techno.

He wouldn’t do the same for *Tubbo*.

And those two things could relate.

Because while Phil was trapped here, Tubbo was not.

Swallowing heavily in an attempt to clear the thickness from his throat, Phil said, “Tubbo, go to my house. If you pull up the crafting table, you’ll find a barrel. Please, bring me its contents.”

“What?” Tubbo croaked out, his brows furrowing. “Wh... why? What’s there?”

Phil reached up a hand to rake it anxiously through his filthy hair. This idea was *for* Tubbo, to get him to safety. If he wasn’t honest about it then none of it would work. If he didn’t trust Tubbo then he couldn’t do it in the first place. “Techno and I set up a... communication system, of sorts. Redstone, enchantments, runes... That barrel, its contents—it’ll get me in contact with him.”

Once Tubbo came back with the communicator, Phil would tell him where he had to go to find Techno—north of L’Manberg, past an ocean, in the arctic—and use the limited capacities of the communicator to briefly inform Techno of Tubbo’s impending approach—he knew

enough about the two's past encounters to know how Techno would react if Tubbo showed up unprompted. Once the boy found the cabin he could properly tell Techno what was going on, and they could devise a plan to save Phil and everything would work out. Everything had to work out.

Tubbo's eyes widened, shining with a sort of dull, apprehensive horror. "Phil... I can't do that. You know I can't do that. You're a prisoner, Techno's a fugitive. Quackity... Dream... they're not—"

At the mention of their names, a wave of hissing, bubbling anger rose in Phil's chest. "You *need* to do this, Tubbo. You need to get away from Quackity. You need to get away from *Dream*. They're no friends of yours. They don't have L'Manberg's— they don't have *your* best interest at heart."

"But—"

"There's no *but*!" Phil all but snarled, his wings flaring out instinctively. Tubbo cringed back, drawing his hands close to his chest. "There's no choice here anymore! It's not... everything's out of your hands! How do you not *see*? Everything's broken and it's them! It's those two fucking—" he turned sharply, cutting off the venomous words that lay on the tip of his tongue. "This is all we have left, Tubbo. You need to get me in contact with Techno."

He had known Tubbo would react like this. He understood why, given Techno's standing with L'Manberg, and he knew that convincing Tubbo would require tact and not the force he was using. But this desperate, burning rage was all that was holding him together. The moment he calmed, he would be once again swamped by the tide of grief and despair that would shatter him and smother the flickering flame of hope that burnt amongst his anger.

It was only because of the terse silence following his words that Phil was able to hear the slight rustle that came from above, just barely registered by his enhanced hearing. His head jerked up and he peered through the darkness, searching for a source. A gleam of red, of green, then a quiet warp and a rush of displaced air. There was nothing but a faint purple glow.

Phil blinked, shook his head, and narrowed his eyes. Nothing but darkness. Had he imagined it?

"Tubbo," Phil said, his anger overridden by a sudden wariness, his gaze locked on the impregnable dark. The president was silent. He still hadn't responded to Phil's harsh words nor his snarled accusations. "Does this corridor have some sort of a ventilation system?"

Tubbo shifted, his brow furrowing, his eyes following Phil's upwards. "I don't— why does it matter?" He shook his head, snapping his gaze back down. "Phil, no. You're not gonna— I can't let you. I can't... I don't..."

"Tubbo," Phil said softly, letting his eyes drop from the roof—more pressing matters were at hand—and fighting to resist the urge to just... *give up*. "Trust me on this, *please*. We don't have much time. Things are... they're not good. They're fucking *awful* But you can— *we* can get out of here. Please."

Tubbo pressed his hands against the wall, dragging himself to his feet but continuing to lean on the rock. “Okay,” he said quietly. He reached up a hand to scrub at his eyes. “Yeah. Okay, Phil.”

Phil let out a gusty exhale, letting out air and a tension he hadn’t known he had been holding. First step, done. This would work. This had to work. He couldn’t fail, not like he had for...

He cut that thought short with an agitated flex of his wings and pivoted, stalking to the back of his cell, twisting around, pacing back to the front. Tubbo watched him silently.

“Go,” Phil said shortly, fighting to keep his voice steady. “Remember, barrel under the crafting table.”

Tubbo nodded carefully. He pushed himself from the wall and started down the corridor.

Phil turned again and strode to the back of the cell.

He didn’t see the hesitant glance Tubbo shot his way, nor the spark of discomfort, of *distrust* that flashed through his expression.

By the time he walked back to the bars, Tubbo was gone.

Ideas and theories crowded his head, but that was good. They held back thoughts of the news he had been delivered and the grief that accompanied it. They were what he needed.

Everything had been going well. Phil’s pushing had been edging Tubbo towards independence, towards control, towards freedom from Quackity’s manipulation. It had been working, and things had, for the briefest time, looked like they were going to be okay. And then Dream had arrived and plotted with Quackity and told Tubbo to visit Logstedshire. What Tubbo saw had shattered him, washed away all the progress, the confidence, left him a broken shadow.

What had Dream been doing before his arrival? Where had Dream been all this time? Even before Phil’s imprisonment, during Tommy’s—his heart stuttered to a stop at the thought of his name but he kept walking, kept pacing, kept thinking, and was just able to push through—exile, the man had been strangely absent from both L’Manberg and the Dream SMP. Phil’s pacing skidded to a stop, his eyes widening in horrified realization.

Dream had known where Tommy was. Dream had been markedly absent since Tommy had been exiled. Dream had sent Tubbo to Logstedshire.

It can’t have been a coincidence.

Phil whirled towards the bars of his cell. He had to tell Tubbo as soon as he returned. It shouldn’t take too long. It wouldn’t take too long. He reached out and tugged at the feathers of his left wing. Even with everything that was clicking together, the horrific puzzle of his situation was far from complete.

But before he could do anything with his realisation, Tubbo had to return with the communicator. He needed to get in contact with Techno. It was a plan that would work. It

was a plan that had to work.

Minutes ticked by.

Phil twisted his fingers anxiously. He didn't know where the prison was relative to the rest of L'Manberg. Tubbo was probably still walking to his house. A wait was to be expected.

He retreated to the back of the cell, his head spinning with the connections he was making and discarding. Dream's arrival was no coincidence. He was connected to this all. But that raised so many more questions, questions whose answers he needed more information to find.

So many pieces, scattered around him. Those he had fit together formed a grisly picture but there was still so much blank space, still so many questions.

Everything was in such disarray.

Phil grabbed the bars of the cell, tugged at them pointlessly for a moment, then twisted and walked back to the corner. His heartbeat was loud. He swallowed. His tongue felt like sandpaper.

His stomach was heavy with an unexplainable dread.

Tubbo shouldn't be taking this long.

Eventually, the prison door opened again, the groan echoing down to him. Hope fluttered in his chest as he darted to the bars, peering into the corridor to catch a glimpse of who it was. And then their silhouette came into view and the hope died a bitter death. It was a guard, here to take away his breakfast tray and replace it with lunch.

Phil grit his teeth and twisted away from the bars, stepping back, clenching his eyes shut. How did they think this was appropriate? Everything that had happened and here they were, delivering him his fucking lunch like it was any other day. Like the world hadn't just collapsed.

Maybe that was the point. Driving in the fact that no matter what happened, he would be stuck in the same cell, with the same schedule, with the same lack of control.

The footsteps came to a halt. When the guard dropped what they were holding what sounded wasn't the sharp clatter of a metal tray but the dull thump of leather impacting stone. Phil turned back and was met with the sight of the guard's retreating back and a leather-bound book lying on the stone, just within reach of the bars.

He eyed it warily. The dread returned ten-fold.

Maybe it was just a message from Tubbo. He had the communicator and was going to wait to return. Maybe something had been found at Logstedshire, a message from—

Phil shook his head, swallowed heavily, inhaled deeply. Tubbo would have come in person. Hope would just let him down.

He crept forward warily and stooped to pull the book into the cell. It was newly crafted, with a blank cover and an uncreased spine. Phil opened it.

His fingers slackened.

His body went numb.

He flinched back as the book landed with a heavy thud.

The open page stared up at him, blank but for a familiar, simplistic smile.

Phil's head jerked up, but the guard was already gone.

Tubbo still hadn't returned.

He was alone.

Chapter End Notes

no way i was gonna make things that easy for them

A [GORGEOUS PIECE](#) BY ISA, ALSO OF PHIL'S MOURNING

A [THIRD](#) AMAZING PEICE BY AGI THAT REALLY CAPTURES PHIL'S HORROR AND HAS HEAPS OF COOL SYMBOLISM

to some extent, a dead man

Chapter Summary

Tubbo was gone.

Tommy was *dead*.

And Phil... he was exhausted, worn down by fear and desperation and grief. Too disconsolate to make another hopeless escape attempt, too tired to shift from where he sat, too wrung out to even cry. A pathetic, shaking wreck, curled against the filthy wall of a tiny cell.

Chapter Notes

this is the one year anniversary of ch 22. it's been a hot minute, hasn't it? due to how long it's been since an update i'm sure there are those of you who might want to keep reading it but don't remember what happened and don't want to reread 80k words, so here you go! [an abridged version of the fic!](#)

chapter-specific warnings for graphic descriptions of corpses, drowning, implied s/h, starvation and death ideation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil was moving before he made the decision to, stumbling backwards, eyes wide, breath shallow, feathers flattened. Adrenaline coursed through his system, screaming at him to *run hide fight*, but there was no way to run, nowhere to hide, no one to fight.

He hit the wall and tried to retreat further still, heedless of the rough stone digging into his back and wings, as though distancing himself from the open book would somehow protect him from those who had sent it.

He couldn't tear his gaze away from the page, from the inked smile staring innocently up at him.

Paired with Tubbo's absence, its message was clear.

You have no control here.

Phil had been scared before, but never like this. What he felt now was the paralysing fear of venom crawling through his veins, the desperate struggle of an insect trapped in a spider's

web, the hopeless weight of a creature faced by its inevitable end.

He was someone who had fought monsters his whole life. Skeletons, zombies, creepers—mindless creatures driven by little more than magic and instinct. They spelled death to those without the ability to fight, but were little more than gnats to those with weapons and the skill to use them.

He was no longer fighting those monsters.

This battle was against monsters who were intelligent and cruel, aware but uncaring of the pain they wrought, pulling strings from behind walls Phil had no way of getting through. He had tried to stand his ground, had done his damndest to combat them in all the little ways he could, but he had been outmatched in every sense of the word. He had been destined to fail since the start.

A web, made not of silk but of lies, had been woven around L'Manberg. A dangerous game of manipulation and control, and Phil was stuck right at its centre.

Give him an axe and a nest of spiders any day of the week. Because as much as he hated those monsters, they were easy. They were *known*.

His adrenaline, useless against a danger he could neither fight nor flee from, was waning. His limbs were trembling, his bones melting, his muscles turning to sludge. He quickly found himself too exhausted to even hold his own weight.

Phil slid to the ground.

The gravity of the situation was beginning to sink in.

Tubbo was gone. Phil had sent him off in a final attempt at escape which had doomed them both. Now that Tubbo had almost certainly been caught, Phil was not just alone but *vulnerable*.

Phil's hands were shaking. His wings were shaking. He swallowed hard. His mouth tasted like ash.

He remembered what Tubbo had said to him that one night. "*Quackity says we should force you to tell us where Technoblade's house is.*" So much had happened since then it may well have been years, but he remembered.

Quackity, who wanted Dream dead but was willing to set it aside for his hatred of Techno. Dream, who had the information Quackity wanted but was withholding it because of a plan of his own. Their alliance, one that should have been doomed from the start, had instead managed to take *everything* from Phil.

If Dream changed his mind, decided whatever he was plotting wasn't worth it and told Quackity where the cabin was—it would void everything Phil had done. Everything he had gone through, was *going* through, to keep Techno safe. It would have all been for nothing.

He tried so hard to protect those he cared about yet still had failed. He always failed. Wilbur first, then Tommy, now Tubbo.

And as good as Techno was, even he would be hard-pressed fighting off a strong enough ambush. As soon as Quackity learned where his cabin was, that was exactly what Techno would be facing. If they managed to take one of his lives, if he respawned armourless and weaponless, taking his other two would be no problem. And Phil, trapped here in this godforsaken prison, would be helpless to stop any of it.

Just another failure, to tie off the set.

Phil shivered at the thought, drawing himself further back into the wall, burying his head in his knees.

Tubbo was gone.

Tommy was *dead*.

And Phil... he was exhausted, worn down by fear and desperation and grief. Too disconsolate to make another hopeless escape attempt, too tired to shift from where he sat, too wrung out to even cry. A pathetic, shaking wreck, curled against the filthy wall of a tiny cell.

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He was lying on a floor of metal.

It was hot to the touch, but not uncomfortably so. A pleasant warmth, like that of sun-warmed sand. But... that wasn't right. The floor shouldn't be metal, it should be... he frowned, thinking, grasping for an answer. He couldn't seem to find one. What did it matter, anyway?

Phil sat up slowly, and had to blink a few times to clear the haze that seemed to have settled over his surroundings. The room was unfamiliar, though the wrought iron bars that encircled him made no effort to hide the fact that he was in a cell of some kind. Each bar was as thick as his forearm, creating a large room that was round in shape. Phil used the newfound space to stretch out both his wings, and felt a dull sort of surprise when his feathers didn't even brush against the metal bars. His muscles burned in protest, a dim ache that spilled down into his shoulders and back. Despite the pain, he found that his wings felt lighter and cleaner than they had in weeks.

The world on the other side of the bars was completely dipped in shadow, without even the suggestion of a floor or walls. The darkness wasn't at all pierced by the cell's light. Phil spun in a slow circle, then looked up. The cell's light, which came from no discernable source, apparently.

Phil cocked his head, still staring upwards. The bars encircling him all curved inwards and joined right in the centre, above which was a loop of metal.

More of a cage than a cell, really.

The thought sent a shiver running up his spine and into his wings. A faint sense of discomfort, absent until now, hung right at the edge of his consciousness. Square rooms had corners to huddle in, and stone walls offered a sense of protection. This cage had neither. He was completely exposed.

There was a touch against his feathers. Phil's heart jumped and he whirled around to face the impenetrable darkness. Nothing had changed. Except, that wasn't right, was it? Before, he had been able to stretch his wings out with space to spare. Now, the iron bars were brushing against the tips of his feathers. The cage was smaller. If not for his spread wings, he wouldn't have even noticed.

The back of his neck prickled. Feathers that had shone in the light were now dull and matted, bent out of shape, pressing against each other at odd angles. Phil folded his wings tightly, ignoring the discomfort that rippled through them.

In the shadows outside the cage, something moved. A pit of dread dug into his chest. He hadn't realised how eerie the silence was.

A rustle of clothing. The rattle of a breath that wasn't his own.

And then, from the darkness, a silhouette emerged.

He could just barely make it out, a humanoid form approaching him with slow, uneven steps. There was no visible floor outside the cage, but the thing on the other side of the bars walked as though there was one. Each second that passed, each step it took, seemed to take an eternity to tick over, until it was finally close enough to be illuminated by the cage's sourceless light.

A corpse stood before him.

Its clothes were in tatters, hanging loosely from its emaciated limbs, a shirt that may have once been white stained crimson and caked in all sorts of unnamable filth. Its skin, thin and blackened with death, was stretched tautly over its gaunt frame and had rotted away in places to reveal glistening muscles and pale bones beneath. Carrion flies buzzed around its head and its flesh bubbled and writhed with buried maggots and worms.

But its face. Oh, god, its *face*.

Matted clumps of blond hair just barely clung to its peeling scalp. One of its eye sockets, ringed with blood and pus, was dark and empty; giving view to the pale, deadened flesh beneath. The one eye it had, dull and cloudy but for a bright blue iris, was locked with his own wide-eyed stare.

It was Tommy.

Some form of recognition must have shown on Phil's face because the moment he had the realisation, Tommy's face contorted into a twisted grin. The expression stretched his sallow, bloodless skin grotesquely over his skull and, with the chunks of flesh that were missing from his cheeks, exposed far too many of his rotten teeth.

Phil's body was out of his control as he staggered backwards, mute with horror, pale with fear. Tommy continued his approach, closing the distance between them, his grin stretching wider and wider in the face of Phil's terror.

The air hung heavy with the sickly scent of death.

"What's the matter, Phil?" Tommy crooned, his voice warped and garbled, grating against his ruined vocal cords, scraping at Phil's ears like the jagged nails that tipped his crooked fingers, but still undeniably *his*. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

Phil inhaled, his breath hitching and shuddering, and found himself just barely able to speak. "T-Tommy? You can't— y-you're—"

"Dead?" Phil flinched back further as Tommy lunged forward and grabbed the bars, leaning right up to them, face twisting into a vicious scowl. "Yeah. I am. And it's *your* fault," he hissed.

The other side of the cage was far closer than it should be, Phil realised as he stepped backwards and felt the bars press into his feathers, sending another chill down his spine and halting any further retreat.

Tommy blinked, his eye sliding to the right, his head tilting. Then his expression shifted again, back into that awful smile, except this time full of a dark sort of satisfaction that sent even more warning bells off in Phil's head. He had just started to twist around when something curled around his throat, and he barely had a moment to struggle before he was yanked backwards with such force that his wings were pinned uselessly against his back. His skull felt as though it would crack open between the bars. He reached up to claw desperately at his throat, to pry away the crushing force, and realised it was *bones* that were digging into his skin and that it was a hand, a skeletal hand, that was cutting off his oxygen.

Phil's lungs burned as he thrashed against the stranglehold, chest heaving as he gasped desperately for air that wouldn't come. Dark patches swum across his vision, and when whatever was behind him spoke, it only just managed to cut through the ringing that had begun in his ears.

"Oh Phil," it said, and the voice was brittle and dry, distorted by the rattle that underlined each word, but it made Phil's blood run cold all the same because while it was warped in the way Tommy's had been, it was also just as familiar. "You should've known to look behind you. Tommy's not your only son with a grudge, after all."

And even if his consciousness hadn't been fading, knowing who stood behind him would have put an end to Phil's struggles. Because it was *Wilbur*, who was just as undead as Tommy but was Wilbur all the same, and Phil couldn't fight him, not again, not after last time.

If anyone deserved to kill him it was the son whose life he had taken.

The vice around his neck let go just as abruptly as it had grabbed hold. His wings flailed uselessly as a sudden, harsh shove sent him careening to the ground where he lay, coughing, gasping, choking for air. His chest burned something fierce, each breath sending shockwaves

of pain around his neck. His stomach churned, nausea building alongside the emotions that writhed inside.

Everything in him wanted to just give up, wanted him to stay there, huddled on the ground, drowning in fear and guilt and shame. But no, he couldn't. He owed it to his sons, after everything, to at least face them. He set his hands against the cage's metal base and pushed himself to his feet with trembling limbs.

He forced his eyes from where they were fixed on the ground, forced himself to look at Wilbur and himself to confront what he had done.

Wilbur's body had decayed far more than Tommy's. He was all but a skeleton, exposed bones covered sparsely by stretches of peeling muscle and skin. The clothes he had died in hung loosely from his skinless frame. Rot crept through the fabric, the dark coat and once-white shirt marred by the jagged slash through the chest and the congealed blood they were soaked in.

He was staring at Phil with the empty eye sockets and wide, bleached grin of a skull. He had no eyes to glare with and no flesh to pull into an expression. Yet still he managed to convey, through the dip of his neck and the cross of his arms and the set of his feet, the contempt, the *hatred* with which he regarded Phil.

Wilbur opened his skeletal mouth and spoke again, his voice barely more than a hiss, dripping with venom. "You killed me, Phil. You did this to me."

Tommy spoke, then. "You could have saved me. You left me, Phil. You left me alone in exile, and I died because of it."

The shadows outside the cage echoed with his sons' words, whispering their own accusations, surrounding him in a suffocating fog of blame and hatred.

"It's your fault. You did this. You killed them both. They're dead because of you."

Phil hunched over, gaze crashing down to the ground. His eyes burned with tears, his throat with unspoken words. There was nothing he could say.

"Killer. Murderer. KILLER. MURDERER."

It was the truth. That's all he was.

A fucking murderer.

The cage was still getting smaller. As the bars crept towards him, the volume of the shouts only increased. It felt as though they were crushing him beneath a physical force. Phil's legs buckled beneath him, sending him plummeting to his knees. He clenched his eyes shut, drew his wings tightly around him to cover his head. He tried to block out the screams that echoed around him, tried to feel anything other than the shame and guilt and despair that ate away at his chest. The metal ground was cold beneath him, a chill that seeped through his clothes, sapping away at his energy and his strength.

Another voice spoke, deep and clear, cutting through the cacophony without any need to shout. “Isn’t this just pitiful,” it said, and no, *no*, it couldn’t be him, not here, not now. Phil felt himself try to hunch down further, to keep his gaze locked on the ground and ignore the new arrival. But it was as though something was forcing him to look up, to watch the silhouette that stepped into the light, to meet his eyes, and *god*, they were full of so much loathing it felt like a physical blow, because it was—

“Techno,” the name came out as a choked whisper, and there was so much more he wanted to say, apologies and explanations and questions, but the words caught in his throat and refused to go any further.

“Oh, how the mighty have fallen,” Techno said, his tone flat, almost bored, a sharp contrast to the heat of his glare and the sneer on his lips. He spread his arms to encompass his brothers, who had fallen still and were watching the confrontation silently. “And you’ve dragged those who trusted you down too.”

Phil stared, horrified, at the wound Techno’s movement had bared. Before, his crimson cloak had been sitting on his shoulders in a way that shielded his chest from view. But opening his arms had pushed it aside and exposed the long gash that had been carved into his chest. It was jagged and soaked in blood, running from his right shoulder to his left hip, cut right down to the bone in most places. Through the ruined, bloody fabric of Techno’s once-white shirt, Phil could see torn muscles, and ribs beneath them, and it was a wicked, *fatal* wound.

“You sold me out, Phil,” Techno said. “You gave in, you told them where I lived, and they hunted me down and slaughtered me like a *beast*. Your weakness got me killed. It got all of us killed.” Techno looked away from Phil and closed his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, his words laced with hurt. “I would’ve given you the world, and this is how you repaid me.”

And of everything, *that* was what truly broke Phil, what sent the tears that had been building in his eyes streaking down his cheeks, what sent the words that had been lodged in his throat spilling from his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped out, struggling to speak past the tears that choked him. He looked up at them, at his sons, at their corpses. They had trusted him. At one point, in a time long since gone by, they had all trusted him. “I’m sorry. I-I didn’t— I’m— I’m so, so sorry.” His voice cracked, his desperate apologies becoming unintelligible past his ragged breathing and heaving sobs.

“But Phil,” Tommy said, his voice almost gentle. He crouched down beside him, his one eye boring into Phil’s. “You don’t get to be sorry.”

“Oh, but you will pay for it,” said Wilbur, the shadows seeming to stretch his skeletal grin wider and wider. “The only reason you were kept alive was because Quackity needed you to find Techno. In selling him out, in killing him, you signed your own death warrant.

“Justice will be served,” said Techno, voice echoing against nonexistent walls.

Phil had a moment to register that, to stare at the corpses of his three sons, his eyes red and puffy, his cheeks stained with tears, his throat still clogged with useless apologies, before he was sent hurtling through the darkness, still trapped in the cage, icy tendrils of wind whipping through his hair and feathers, digging into his skin. As he fell, the shadows began to streak with colour and light until his surroundings had melted into the stormy grey of a harsh winter's day.

The shift had knocked him off his feet, and as he dragged himself back up he realised the cage was now so small he could barely stand up straight. He hadn't been able to tell at its original scale, but at its current size it was obvious that it wasn't just any cage. It was a bird cage.

A bird cage for L'Manberg's avian hybrid.

Fitting.

Phil threw out his wings to steady himself as a gust of wind rocked the cage and nearly sent him back to the ground. The cage continued to swing lazily, forcing Phil to grab to the bars for support. His breath caught in his throat as he stared down at the murky water that stretched out beneath him, glimmering in the cold winter sun.

He was hanging, suspended, some fifteen feet over a distinctly manmade lake.

Phil swallowed hard. He knew where he was.

He turned slowly, dread sitting heavily in his chest. The main square of New L'Manberg, populated by a large crowd, all of them staring up at him, unnervingly still and silent. The majority of the faces were indistinguishable, almost seeming to blur together—a faceless mob of people standing, watching, waiting. But those who were closest to him, *those* he recognised.

Phil's gaze was immediately drawn to Tommy, Techno and Wilbur, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, right at the front of the crowd. He stared at them, eyes wide. They looked... they looked *good*, in a way he hadn't seen in years, not since... god, he couldn't even remember how long it had been.

Tommy, in the red-sleeved shirt he used to be inseparable from, lacking the slump of his shoulders that had come from the weight of his experiences. Wilbur, wearing his favourite yellow sweater, standing tall, his hair clean and painstakingly styled in the way he used to favour. Techno, his head held high, looking downright regal in his shining crown and pristine cloak.

They looked so much like the children they had been that Phil could almost pretend that's who they were. That everything was alright, that he wasn't trapped in a hanging cage, that images of their corpses weren't still fresh in his mind. But it was their expressions that broke any illusion of normalcy there might have been. Their faces were completely blank, with unblinking eyes that stared right through him, vacant and empty. It was more than a simple lack of emotion, it was a complete absence of *anything*, as though their consciousnesses had

fled their bodies and left behind mere shells. It was awful—unnatural and sickening in a way that felt instinctively, innately *wrong*.

Phil tore his gaze away from them, unable to bear the sight. Around them stood other people he recognised—Quackity, Ranboo, Fundy, Ponk, Sapnap, Punz, a group that seemed to stretch on endlessly even within the confines of the square, their faces blurring together as they got further away. All of their expressions were eerily blank, their heads tipped up towards him, facing him but not seeing him.

Despite the crowd's unnatural stillness, the air thrummed with a palpable anticipation, like they were all hanging on the edge of their seats, waiting eagerly for...

Phil glanced up at the rope his cage hung from, and followed it from the top of the cage, across a wooden support beam, and down to L'Manberg's planked wooden ground, where it was tied off around a cleat, right next to an empty podium. He swallowed heavily, then looked down at the water below him.

Right.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, shoulders slumping in defeat, unable to look back at the crowd. His options were exhausted. *He* was exhausted, tired and worn down and hopeless. There was no one coming to save him, no way he was getting out alone. After everything he had fought through, after all he had experienced, after the life he'd lived. This was what beat him. There was nothing left to do but wait with the crowd.

It didn't take long.

He dragged his head up at the sound of boots against wood, easily heard over the silence of the crowd. Phil's heart somehow managed to drop further as he stared at the podium that was no longer empty. God, he should have known this was coming. The crowd was made up of citizens of L'Manberg and the Dream SMP. It made sense that they would be waiting for their leaders.

Tubbo stood at the podium. Shadowing him was Dream, the only person in armour, holding a gleaming netherite axe. Tubbo was staring out over the crowd, his back to Phil, but as the hybrid watched, Dream turned towards his cage, cocked his masked head, and raised his hand in a mocking wave.

Phil shrunk back, his feathers flattening. His heart was loud in his ears, fear and hatred twisting through his gut as he stared, wide-eyed, down at Dream.

It was the first acknowledgement he had been given.

Phil's attention snapped back to Tubbo as he cleared his throat. "A murderer, getting what he deserves," he said, his voice quiet but ringing clearly though the silent crowd, lacking even a hint of emotion. Without another word, without a speech or a conviction or a condemnation, without the tiniest bit of hesitation, he turned to Dream and nodded. And there was so much swirling through Phil's chest, guilt and misery and despair, but he had no time to even begin

to process any of it because Dream had already turned, had already lifted his axe, was already bringing it down on the rope secured next to the podium.

The peal of the axe rang through the square. The rope severed instantly.

Phil's stomach lurched as the cage's base dropped under his feet, and he instinctively spread his wings as far as he could. He managed to slow himself for a split-second before the bars hit his head, sending pain lancing through his skull, stunning him and pulling him down. The iron cage was far too heavy for his wings to grant any lift.

It barely took a few seconds for the cage to hit the lake, landing with so much momentum it was already half-submerged by the time the water's drag slowed its descent. Phil grabbed onto the bars at the top of the cage, pulling his legs up, flapping his wings in a futile attempt to remain above the rising water.

A shudder ran through his body as, despite his efforts, he felt it creep past his ankles, his knees, his waist, his chest, until he was struggling to swim, pressed against the top of the cage. The water was icy cold, a sudden chill that dug through skin and into muscle and bone, sending his heart into an erratic frenzy and quickening his breathing into shallow, desperate gasps. Neglect had stripped his feathers of their waterproof quality days ago, and so they quickly became completely saturated, only adding to the weight that dragged him down.

He took one final gasp of breath before the water enveloped his head and there was nothing but murky darkness all around.

He didn't know how long he managed to hold his breath, each second intensifying the nightmare of oxygen-deprived burning in his lungs. Pressure built in his ears as the cage sank to the depths of the lake, a sharp pain that pulsed in time with the overwhelmingly loud beat of his heart. At some point, he lifted a hand to pinch his nose shut, blocking his ability to inhale, knowing this hell would only get so much worse once he did. His skin had gone completely numb, leaving him with no sense of anything other than the unbearable pressure in his ears and pain in his chest. He felt woozy and sick and his lungs felt like they were going to burst, tearing and screaming and begging for oxygen. He couldn't take it. Phil opened his mouth and gasped for breath.

The rush of inhaled water caught in his throat and filled his lungs, making them heavy and clogged and his brain only try harder to breathe again, and again, gasping in more and more water, choking and trying to cough and vomit and get it out, all while gasping for breath and choking on more and more of the water. He gagged and his body heaved, trying to save itself, but it was in him now, lodged in his lungs, burning with unimaginable pain. Stabs of agony shot across his chest with each unintentional gasping breath. He kept fighting for air as black spots began dancing at the edge of his vision, the fear and desperation renewed with each new mouthful of water he choked on.

Phil was still gagging as he pitched off the edge of his mattress, landing on all fours and taking huge, desperate breaths of air. It took his brain a moment to catch onto the fact that it was no longer actively dying, after which he found himself unable to stop his trembling limbs from giving in and sending him to the ground.

He shuddered and rolled onto his back, wings spread haphazardly beneath him. He stared at the ceiling, his chest heaving, simply savouring his ability to breathe properly. His lungs burned with remembered pain, the feeling of water spilling down his throat fresh in his mind.

His heart thudded painfully loud in the silence of the prison, its noise accompanied only by his ragged breathing. Phil squeezed his eyes shut. He was... well, he wasn't safe, but he was in no imminent danger. It had been a nightmare. It hadn't been real.

As the echoes of fear and pain ebbed away, Phil was left feeling empty. Tired and wrung out and spent. Each day was the same nothing, each night plagued with a new terror. He had watched, helpless, as Techno's cabin went up in flames and the air rang with screams of his son burning alive. He had walked into that same cabin and been met with Techno's disembowelled corpse, his blood painting the walls, dripping to the floor. He had felt himself die, had looked on as each of his sons were killed before him, each time hollowing him out a little more.

He was tired. Tired of the nightmares, tired of the fear, tired of the waiting.

He didn't know how long it had been since Tubbo had disappeared. He had gotten no visitors, no information, no demands. He had no idea what was happening in the world outside his cell. He had thought Quackity would be the first in line to show up and mock him, or hurt him or... worse. But there had been nothing. Complete silence. And then, as the hours had passed and no one had come to replace the torches as they burned down to cooling embers, complete darkness too.

The regular delivery of his meals had also stopped, and though the pangs of hunger had faded with the passing time, the dryness of his mouth was far more difficult to ignore. His tongue was rough leather against his gums, his throat a rusted drain pipe, grating and aching every time he swallowed. Maybe he was just going to be left here, forgotten, until his blood turned to sludge and his organs failed and he withered away into nothing. Maybe he'd become a ghost, as innocent and blind as Wilbur's echo was, and exist endlessly in that state of blissful ignorance. Maybe there was an afterlife where he would meet his sons again, apologise for everything he had done, maybe even get the forgiveness he didn't deserve.

Phil pulled himself from his thoughts with a heavy sigh, reaching a hand up and dragging it across his face, pushing aside the hair that clung to his sweat-soaked skin. He used his other arm to prop himself up, trying to ignore the way the motion made his head spin and gave rise to a painful throbbing in his temple. He glanced tiredly over the interior of his cell, trying to make out his surroundings without the light of the torches.

Not that he didn't already know what was there. It felt like he'd been here for weeks, and in that time there had been so little that had changed. He couldn't see in the darkness, but still he knew exactly where the mattress was, shoved into the corner with a ratty little blanket carelessly thrown over it. He knew about the clamps that had bound his wings, discarded against the far wall where they'd been resting since Tubbo had removed them. He knew how grimy the cobblestone floor was, nearly blackened with the filth that caked it; how the corridor beyond the bars seemed to stretch endlessly far, lined with other cells, all of them barren and empty; how the braziers and torches set along the hallway were all burnt out, filled with nothing but ash and dust and soot.

He knew about the shredded paper that lay across the floor, left there after he'd torn up the book in a fit of stress that he attempted to relieve through destruction. But then the book had been gone, and the knot of anxiety and dread in his chest had still been there, still urging him to rip, tear, break, his fingers itching to pull at *something*, and there had only been one option.

Birds will pluck their feathers if they're put under enough emotional duress. It's a defence mechanism, the endorphins released by the pain working to lessen some of the tension they're feeling.

The bloody feathers scattered along the cell floor told that story.

Phil closed his eyes and lay back down, hardly caring about how his head knocked against the stone. The very idea of not thinking about anything tended to send thoughts racing through a person's head, but he was finding it easier and easier, as time passed, to adopt a sense of numb, hollow vacancy.

It should have worried him. He was a *hybrid*, for god's sake. If things got bad enough, he could sink into that half-feral, animalistic state. He had been pushed there once before. It had been awful and horrifying, having control of his body torn so violently away from his rational mind.

And the possibility of it happening again, it *was* worrying, but in a way that felt impersonal, detached. *Because*, a part of him whispered, *it might be nice not to have to feel anything*. He was so tired, and so scared, and so tired of being so scared. Maybe if he fell far enough, not even torture would be able to pull him out of it. At least Techno would be safe.

His understanding of the passage of time was slipping away, but he knew it couldn't have been more than a few hours since he had woken up. He was already feeling tired again, lightheaded and sick, his eyes burning behind his closed eyelids.

It wouldn't be so bad if he fell asleep again. Just a few more minutes, or hours, or...

Just enough to let the time pass.

Chapter End Notes

did you like the 4/4 sbi. it's so wonderful isn't it? i added it because i just love you guys so much

this chapter really doesn't have much in the way of plot but it's fiine. i just wanted to explore phil's psyche, and thought a dream would be a good way to do that, given his reality leaves little in the way of,, exploration.

also! thank you *so* much if you've made it to the end of the chapter, sticking with me even after this long. i'm gonna smooch all of u, in the most parasocial way possible. i also literally have no idea when ch 24 will come out. hopefully, it won't be march 6 2023, eh?

comments of any length are really, really appreciated!

YOOO GUYS AGI DID SOME FUCKIN EPIC [FANART](#) OF PHIL REACTING TO THE BOOK! GO CHECK IT OUT!!

a coat of past memories

Chapter Summary

“Techno,” Tommy said, watching his brother as he crossed the room with a bundle of firewood in his arms. Techno ignored the address. It was only the fifth one in as many seconds. “Techno. Techno, pay attention to me. Techno. *Techno.*”

Techno dropped the logs into a holder and turned with a long-suffering sigh. “That was nine, ‘Technos,’” he deadpanned. “What do you want?”

Chapter Notes

a tlgo update? in *this* economy? it's more likely than you might think.

i'm going to talk a bit about updates in the end notes, because we all know they're really slow atm. nothing so grim as an abandonment, don't worry. but i'm also not gonna talk about techno's passing, and would appreciate it if you guys didn't talk about it too much it in the comments either. thank you <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a quiet knocking on the cabin’s door.

Tommy jerked up from where he was hunched over his compass, his head snapping towards the doorway. His eyes, still puffy and red-rimmed, were wide, and his heart hammered in his ears. Apprehension crawled up his chest, mixing with the familiar sensation of fear to form a concoction that swirled in his gut, bubbled up his throat, sat bitterly on the back of his tongue.

“Tommy?” Techno’s voice called out, and Tommy felt tension immediately unwind from his body. Of course it was Techno. Truly, it would be ridiculous of Tommy to expect anything else. His shoulders slumped as he let out a slow, relieved exhale. Techno knocked again. “Hey, Tommy. You doin’ alright?”

“Yeah,” Tommy said, the word coming out as little more than a croak. He winced, cleared his throat, and tried again. “Yeah! I’m fine!”

“You mind if I come in?” Techno asked.

Tommy stared at the shut door.

Could I really stop you? he couldn't help but think.

"That's actually something I would take *extreme* personal offence to," he said aloud. "Honestly, Techno, if you walk through that door I will have no choice but to start stabbing shit. So much shit. Your cabin would never recover."

Techno's scoff only barely carried through the wooden door. A moment later the doorknob turned and the door swung open, inviting in a blast of cold air alongside his brother, who quickly stepped in and shut the door behind him. Tommy shivered.

"Of course," Techno drawled, unclasping his cloak and hanging it from the back of the door. Some kind of grey powder coated his hands and dusted along his arms. "The very prospect has me quaking in my boots."

"As it should," Tommy huffed with a decisive nod. He looked back down at the compass in his hands and hesitated a moment before carefully reaching out to deposit it on the small table beside the couch.

For however much it had—and still did—mean to him, he didn't quite feel up to clasping it back around his neck. Not now, at least. For however desperate he had been to get his hands on it, now that he actually had it again, now that he had stewed over everything it was connected to, he found that the thought of it sitting over his heart again twisted at something unpleasant in his chest.

Your Tubbo.

What a load of bullshit that had turned out to be.

And it was Tubbo's birthday. Tommy still couldn't quite get the thought out of his head. He found himself caught staring at the compass again, its iron case gleaming in the cabin's warm light. It was Tubbo's 17th birthday, and they had never been further apart.

Tommy grimaced and then turned back to Techno, deciding that a distraction was very much in order.

"What's that shit on your hands?" he demanded, watching as Techno moved across the room and over to the cabin's kitchenette.

"Concrete powder," Techno grunted, using a towel and some water to scrub his hands clean, then filling a kettle and setting it to the boil.

"Okay," Tommy said, once it became clear that Techno had no plans to elaborate. "And why are your hands covered in concrete powder?"

Techno stilled for a moment, throwing a brief glance over to where Tommy was sat on his couch and then turning around to fully face him. Tommy shifted nervously under the weight of Techno's attention, suddenly wary of the answer he was about to receive.

What sort of a reaction was that?

“Because I just came back from filling that cave of yours with concrete,” Techno said casually, almost gently, carefully watching Tommy for his response. Tommy’s eyes widened, instinctively moving over to the ladder hatch that lead down to the cabin’s lower levels.

“Yeah,” Techno confirmed before Tommy even had the chance to ask. “That one.”

“Oh,” Tommy murmured. He blinked, and was completely unprepared for the pain that stung at his eyes, the telltale sign of gathering tears. He didn’t know how to react. He *certainly* didn’t know how to express the warm bubble of relief, of *gratitude* that swelled in his chest. Knowing that pit, that hellhole of decay and misery, was no longer beneath him. Knowing the evidence of those wretched days of rot and sickness was gone. “Oh. That’s... good. Um. Thanks”

A tight-lipped smile was the only response Techno gave before he turned back around and busied himself with the now-whistling kettle.

“Want a drink?” he asked as he pulled a mug from one of his cupboards. “I’m making coffee.”

Tommy wrinkled his nose. “Ew, no. Coffee tastes like shit,” he said, quickly locking down the warmth that still swirled in his chest. “Besides, aren’t you not meant to drink it after noon? Doesn’t it mess with your sleep or whatever?”

“See, Tommy, that is just *incorrect*, ” Techno scoffed. “Who told you that?”

Tommy shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s what Wilbur said. Back at the start of L’Manberg. Always told Tubbo off for drinking it too late.”

“Did he now?” Techno drawled, pouring the kettle into a jug of some kind, the boiling water trickling through some sort of filter and coming out a rich brown. “He certainly didn’t seem to care in your little ravine. And I’m not Wilbur, am I? ”

Tommy winced, looking down at his hands. A hangnail he had been absentmindedly picking at had begun to hurt, little bursts of pain that flared up each time he tugged at it. He curled his hands into loose fists.

“Of course not,” he mumbled, and then silence lapsed between them.

Techno, never one to fill space with mindless chatter, didn’t seem particularly inclined to provide fuel to the conversation. And Tommy wasn’t sure what else there was to say, something that was certainly helped by the fact that he didn’t even feel like talking much more. It was barely mid-afternoon yet already he felt tired, an exhaustion that really didn’t lend itself to Tommy’s usual brand of energy.

Maybe it was the weight of the past weeks finally catching up to him.

Techno spent the rest of the daylight bustling around his property, brewing and crafting, looking after his tools and farms, all the while remaining within shouting distance of the

cabin's main room. After receiving one too many complaints of boredom, he turned to one of his bookshelves and pulled out a pile of books to deposit on the table beside Tommy's couch.

Tommy had never particularly liked reading. When he decided he was going to voice that opinion, the flat stare Techno had levelled at him—before he even begun speaking, no less!—was enough to kill the words in his throat.

They had soup for dinner, warm and hearty. It had been a common meal from their childhood, easily made with the ingredients from the farm they had grown up on. Perhaps it was an unintentional reminder, but Tommy was almost certain Techno would have made the same connection.

Neither of them mentioned it.

Techno hovered by Tommy's side as he made his way over to his bed, moving carefully with his prosthetic, holding his crutches loosely off the ground as he tried to walk without their support. Techno ended up having to catch Tommy as, too stubborn to plant himself with his crutches, he overbalanced and nearly faceplanted into the planked wooden floor.

Tommy perched on the edge of his bed and unfastened his prosthetic before curling beneath the layers of thick fur blankets. Tommy wasn't the one who switched off the lights, nor was it he who reached out to pull the warm bedding right up to his chin.

"Goodnight, Tommy," Techno murmured, and smiled softly as Tommy mumbled out some semblance of a response.

It was a quiet evening and—as Tommy fell asleep within minutes of his head hitting the pillow—an even quieter night.

-o-O-o-

"Techno," Tommy said, watching his brother as he crossed the room with a bundle of firewood in his arms. Techno ignored the address. It was only the fifth one in as many seconds. "Techno. Techno, pay attention to me. Techno. *Techno*."

Techno dropped the logs into a holder and turned with a long-suffering sigh. "That was nine, 'Technos,'" he deadpanned. "What do you want?"

"I'm *bored*," Tommy whined, flopping back into the couch cushions from where he had been perched on the edge. They had long-since finished their physiotherapy for the day—Tommy managing some more good progress—and while he had tried to busy himself with other tasks within his reach, nothing had managed to truly captured his attention. "I want something to do. Something *fun*. Something good for a man as big as me."

"Okay, Tommy," Techno sighed. "What do you want to do?"

Tommy blinked. Despite his whining of not even a few seconds prior, he wasn't even remotely prepared to answer a question like that. Dream had always just *told* him what they were going to do.

"Um," Tommy fumbled momentarily, trying to think of something to name.

He had always liked making things. It was one of the few things Dream hadn't been able to take away from him in exile. Little whittling projects he had kept hidden from Dream, refusing to drop them into the pits alongside the rest of his items. The guilt of his deception had burned, the terror of being found out bitter against his tongue, but he had managed. He ended up carving a small wooden cow for himself.

It was blown up at the end, alongside all the rest of his progress.

Tommy had made sandcastles, too. Built while the tide was low, safe in the knowledge that encroaching waves would wash away any evidence. Once, he had made the walls of L'Manberg. Rough and lumpy, but the thought had been there. He had sat by the replica long after the sun had set, shivering in the chill of the night, and fought tears as he watched the water come in and sweep it all away.

"I don't know," Tommy said with a nonchalant shrug, banishing the thoughts from his head. "Do you have sewing stuff? Games? Any work I can do?"

"Work?" Techno lifted an eyebrow, and Tommy immediately regretted that particular suggestion. He hadn't actually meant *that* one. "A most un-Tommy-like offer. But yes, I have so much work. My back is breaking under the stress of all the work I have. It's a hard life, living alone in the arctic. My hair is turning grey."

"Shut up," Tommy huffed. "I'm not doing shit for you."

"You're the one who offered," Techno shrugged. "Why don't you go sweep the stables, Tommy? Fix the fenceposts? Fetch some firewood. Some good old fashioned chores should do you some good."

"I didn't mean it," Tommy whined, kicking out his legs. "I still can't even walk, man!"

"Going back on our word now, are we?" Techno drawled, and Tommy's stomach swooped uncomfortably. "Wow. Horrible. Disappointing. I had thought better of you, Tommy. Whatever else will you do to earn your keep?"

"Sorry," Tommy said immediately, shrinking down into the couch. "Sorry. Sorry, Techno, I didn't mean to lie. I want to help. I want to help, I-I want to stay but I— m-my leg— I still can't really—"

"Whoa," Techno cut in, stepping towards Tommy. Tommy flinched, and Techno stopped short. "There's no need to apologise, Tommy. I'm just kidding with you. You don't have to work to stay here, Tommy."

Tommy hesitated a moment before nodding silently, eyes downcast. His heart thrummed in his chest, panic prickling like fire across his skin.

Techno's eyes bored into him.

"Is there anything else you want to do?" he asked after a moment, voice uncharacteristically soft. Tommy shifted uncomfortably.

"No," Tommy muttered after only a moment's hesitation. "No, it's fine. I'm sorry for bothering you. I shouldn't have interrupted your work. I'm sorry."

"...still don't need to apologise," Techno said, and Tommy squeezed his eyes shut. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Tommy said, turning his head away from Techno. He felt cold and small. "Please go away."

"Tommy—"

"Go away!" Tommy repeated more forcefully, and then his throat immediately closed up as he registered the command he'd just given. The fact that he had just tried to *order Techno around*. Panic crawled across his skin. "I-I mean... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Techno, I—"

"It's okay, Tommy," Techno said firmly, and Tommy didn't dare look at him. "I'll go, if you want me to. But... don't hesitate to call out if you need me, okay?"

"Of course I will," Tommy lied, giving Techno the affirmative Tommy knew he was looking for.

"Alright, Tommy," Techno sighed, turning towards the door. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I'm going to burn your cabin down," Tommy called as Techno pulled open the door, hoping the crack would help leave the interaction on a somewhat positive note.

"I have to give it to you," Techno said, stepping outside and glancing back at Tommy. "I *would* probably do that."

The door shut, and Tommy was left alone with his thoughts and the fear that still prickled uncomfortably across his skin. It felt wrong. He felt *wrong*, in a way that set his teeth on edge and lifted the hair on his arms.

Seconds bled into minutes into hours and a part of Tommy, for some unknowable reason, felt convinced that Dream was about to come barging through the cabin door. He didn't speak up about it this time though, choosing instead to fill his time with playing with his prosthetic, studying what he could of the cabin, and trying to find the most comfortable position on the couch.

Techno came and went, doing various menial tasks and making Tommy flinch each time he pushed open the door. Besides a few concerned glances, Tommy went more-or-less ignored,

just as he had asked for.

Tommy wasn't sure how long had passed when Techno finally addressed him again.

"Hey, Tommy," Techno said, and Tommy glanced up from where he'd been fiddling with his prosthetic. "Do you think you'd be up for a walk outside? I've been thinking 'bout it since yesterday, and... there's a friend I think you'd like to meet."

"Huh?" Tommy's eyes widened "Aren't we the only ones here? Is-is there someone else?"

Techno hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. "No other people are here, don't worry. But this is... I want to surprise you," he said. "It's a good surprise."

"Oh. Alright," Tommy said, and for however curious he was he was also unable to quite quell the wariness that bubbled in his chest. He pushed himself off the couch, holding his arms out to balance himself. He pulled away as Techno reached out to help support him. "I can do this. I don't need help."

Techno watched worriedly as Tommy took careful steps over to where his crutches leaned against the wall, focusing on keeping his stride slow and even. Tommy reached his destination and pressed his hands against the wall with a relieved exhale, shoulders slumping.

He heard a small clapping noise coming from behind him and twisted around to see Techno watching him with warm eyes and a slight smile, hands held together before him.

"That was good," Techno praised gruffly, and Tommy felt something pleased curl in his chest. "You did well."

"Of course I did," Tommy said, rolling his eyes as he reached out for his crutches and set them beneath his arms. "I'm a big man, Technoblade. The biggest of men. I can't believe you ever doubted me."

"Naturally," Techno said, moving over to the door and pulling it open. He waited, holding the door as Tommy hobbled over to him and crossed outside. Tommy went up to the rail of the porch, reaching out to steady himself on the frosted wood as he stared up at the sun hanging low in the afternoon sky.

With the cave, and his injuries, and his healing, It had been a while since he had been outside. Since he had breathed fresh air, watched the golden sun. Tommy stood on the verandah of Techno's lonely cabin and soaked it all in, relishing the light, airy feeling that bubbled up in his chest.

Techno cleared his throat, breaking Tommy from his reverie. Tommy turned towards him and saw that Techno had descended the short staircase and was looking up at Tommy with an unimpressed raised eyebrow. Tommy felt an embarrassed heat creeping up his neck.

"Sorry big man," he mumbled, using his crutches to join Techno on the snow.

“S alright,” Techno said, nodding his head over to where his horse sat in a small pen. “You can wait with him while I go and fetch the... surprise.”

“You’re being so mysterious,” Tommy huffed, but he followed Techno’s suggestion and moved over towards the horse, who watched his approach with interested eyes. “The big Technoblade with his big secrets. I bet you think you’re so cool.”

“I am cool,” Techno called over his shoulder as he moved away from Tommy, rounding the corner of his cabin and going out of sight.

“Keep telling yourself that!” Tommy shouted after him. When he didn’t get a response he turned his attention back to the horse, quickly unlatching the fence gate so he could move right next to him.

The horse whickered, leaning forward to butt his nose into Tommy’s stomach. Tommy laughed softly, dropping one of his crutches to reach out and run a hand along the horse’s head and scratch behind his ears.

“You’re a good boy,” Tommy murmured. The horse gave him an expression that very clearly said *I know*, and Tommy laughed again.

Minutes passes as he stood with Techno’s horse, patting him gently and showering him with praises as he waited for Techno to return with his oh-so special surprise. At some point, Tommy let his other crutch fall into the snow, instead using the horse to hold himself steady. It worked well enough.

Something rattled loudly and Tommy’s heart lurched in his chest. His head jerked over towards the source and he saw that the doors to the ground floor of Techno’s cabin had been thrown wide open. Techno was back, then.

The horse whickered soothingly as Tommy’s heart settled in his chest, watching with wide eyes as Techno’s emerged from the cabin and turned to beckon something that Tommy, from his vantage point, couldn’t quite see. And then, a moment later, a cow’s head emerged from the cabin, followed quickly by the rest of it. A surprised breath puffed through Tommy’s lips, something painful tugging in his chest.

Was this the ‘friend’ that Techno had wanted him to meet?

As the cow stepped into the sunlight, its light brown coat began shining with golden undertones and tiny spots of yellow became visible, scattered through its fur. Tommy blinked. That... wasn’t normal.

Techno turned back around and his gaze landed on Tommy, still standing in the horse’s pen. He moved over towards him, the cow trailing placidly along behind.

Techno cleared his throat. “I, uh, I seem to remember you having a pet cow?” Techno raised a hand to rub at the back of his neck. “I thought you might like to meet,” he threw a glance back at the cow, who mooed softly, “Bob here. Technically he’s not fully a cow, but y’know. If the shoe fits, and all.”

Tommy stared at the cow and couldn't help but think of Henry's broken body. The leash that had been wrapped tightly, too tightly, around his twisted, snapped neck. The blood that had pooled beneath the cow's carcass, that had seeped into the dirt around him, that had stained Tommy's boots and pants as he had dropped to his knees beside him, cradling his limp head, crying into his matted, bloody fur.

His body was buried in a grave by Tommy's holiday house, somewhere he wished he could go but was barred from, just like he was from everywhere else on this godforsaken server.

He started at the cow remembered Dream's coldly smiling mask as he had hefted his axe above Mushroom Henry, heedless of Tommy's screams of protest. The sickening thud as the weapon had arced down, cleaving through the mooshroom's neck, through hide and flesh and bone. The way her decapitated corpse had crumpled to the ground, blood pouring from the stump of her neck and coating Tommy's trembling hands and arms in the warm, sticky liquid.

Her body had been blown up along with everything else Tommy had come to care about during his exile.

The horror and grief and rage of the memories came back with a sharp pang that stole the breath from Tommy's lungs and left him unable to do anything but stare blankly, mournfully, at Techno and the animal that stood behind him.

Techno let out a little huff—a nervous, awkward sound—as the silence stretched on.

"I'm sorry," he eventually said. "I thought maybe it would do you some good. But I'll just..." he turned, placing a hand on Bob's back and beginning to lead him away from Tommy.

Tommy's eyes widened slightly as the movement snapped him from the trance he had been pulled into.

"No, wait!" he cried out, pushing away from Techno's horse and taking a few stumbling steps over towards Techno, wobbling dangerously as he struggled to balance in the uneven snow.

Techno's eyes widened and he let go of Bob to dive forward as Tommy teetered over, grabbing him by the shoulders to stop him from planting in the snow.

"Oi!" Tommy snapped, batting at Techno's hands. "I don't need your fuckin help. I wanna see the cow."

"Not a cow," Techno grumbled, but cautiously relinquished his supportive grip on Tommy's arms. "Where'd you put your crutches?"

"Dropped them by your horse. And I just want to say, Techno, that your horse is superior to you in every possible way."

Techno blinked, then shrugged. "Can't argue with that. His name's Carl."

"Carl! That's a great name, actually. Very fitting," Tommy said as he held out his arms to balance himself, taking a few careful steps towards Bob, the... not-cow, apparently. "Wait so,

if Bob's not a cow, then what is he?"

"Y'know, I'm not entirely sure. Never seen anything else like him. He's part cow, like how mooshrooms are, except he's got flowers instead of mushrooms."

"Oooh," Tommy said. Bob was watching his approach curiously, ears perked, eyes warm. Now that he was closer, it was obvious that the bright yellow patches in his golden coat were, as Techno had said, flowers. Dandelions, specifically. "Do you have a name for him?"

"...Bob?"

Tommy took another slow step forward. Techno hovered worriedly by his side, prepared to catch him should he fall. "No, dumbass. His *species*."

"Oh." Techno paused for a moment. "Nah."

Tommy reached out carefully to the not-cow in front of him, holding his hand just over the animal's nose. Bob regarded him for a moment, before bumping his head forward, nuzzling into Tommy's hand. Tommy grinned, then turned to Techno.

"Well, I think that's fucking stupid of you. You have such a special boy here!" He looked back at Bob and cooed, "Oh, aren't you just such a special boy? Yes you are, you are! And I'm going to think of a wonderful name for you, because Technoblade is just a bitch and a bad owner and couldn't be bothered doing it himself. Oh yes I will. I will!"

Techno rolled his eyes, a slight smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he watched Tommy reach up to scratch behind Bob's ears.

"I'm sure you will," Techno said. "After all, you're just *so* wonderful at naming things."

"Oi, what the fuck is that supposed to mean? I fucking am, and I'll prove it to you!" Tommy carded a hand through Bob's coat, finding a dandelion and gently parting the hair around it. "You can be a..." His brow furrowed as he studied the flower, thinking. "Flower cow? No, that's dumb. Uh. Dandelion... dande-cow? Bloom cow? No, no, that's no good. It's gotta roll off the tongue. All smooth and shit. Hmm." Tommy looked up at Techno, who was watching him with a quirked brow. "Technoblade! My man, the only man ever. Do you have any ideas?"

"No, Tommy," Techno said. "I'm afraid you're on your own for this one."

Tommy scoffed. "You are both boring *and* bad. A bitch, I say. Unlike Bob here. Who is a... flattle! Flower cattle!" He paused for a moment. "Nope actually ignore that. It's fucking terrible. Um." His eyes widened as inspiration struck. "A moobloom!"

Techno snorted. "A *moobloom*?"

"It's perfect!" Tommy cried. "It's literally such a good name. I will not be taking *any* criticism."

"It's literally just a pun of mooshroom," Techno said, unimpressed.

“I didn’t fucking ask,” Tommy snapped, jabbing a finger up at Techno, who rolled his eyes. “And what did I just say about criticism?”

Bob, the newly-designated moobloom, mooed happily, butting his nose into Tommy’s hand again. Tommy laughed softly, his attention immediately drawn back to the animal beside him. His other hand rested on the moobloom’s shoulder, allowing him to stand steadily.

“Aw, I love you too,” Tommy cooed, running his hand up the moobloom’s nose and then patting him on the head.

“I’ll leave you two to it, then,” Techno said after a stretch of silence interspersed only by Tommy’s affectionate mumbling. He sounded a little uncomfortable. “Work to do, all that. He’s my cow, though. Don’t forget it.”

“Moobloom,” Tommy corrected immediately, lifting his head from where he had buried it in Bob’s pelt and pinning Techno with a glare. “Don’t *you* fucking forget it.”

“*Moobloom*,” Techno mocked, nose scrunching up. “I’m really not hearing it, Tommy.”

“That’s because you’re a bitch! A bitch, Technoblade! Now leave us be, you’re ruining my vibe.”

Techno rolled his eyes, muttering something under his breath as he turned and made his way back up to the cabin. Tommy turned his attention back to Bob, who was staring up at him with warm gold eyes.

“Moo once if your owner is a bitch,” Tommy said, scratching him behind his horns.

Bob leaned into Tommy’s gentle touch and let out a happy moo.

Tommy grinned broadly down at the newly-designated moobloom.

Victory tasted sweet.

Chapter End Notes

bedrock bros! moobloom bob!!! i've had this idea since 2020 lmaooo. it just took a while to get there, y'know

but alright, real talk, on updates. once again, not abandoning this! i want to get this damn fic finished even if i've got no readers by the end of it. and hey, this update didn't quite take the 365 days of last one, so there's an improvement! however, unlike the last hiatus which was entirely due to me running out of motivation for everything in my life, this one is because, well.

i, worm curseworm, am now a tntduo stan.

seriously, tntduo are absolutely rotting away at my brain, and this fic really doesn't have *any* tntduo in it so my interest in it has been detracted a little bit. and so while i'm not quitting tlgo, this break has been due to the fact that i've been spending my time writing a new tntduo fic with a friend instead of... this.

and so!! there's no pressure, but if you subscribe to the tntduo agenda, you would be interested in joining us tntduo stans, *or* you would simply be interested in reading some more of my work, may i present to you:

[a hundred red flags too late, my dear!](#)

It's a canon-divergent AU, set after The Wilbur Van. Quackity goes to Paradise to destroy its ruins and finds Wilbur bleeding out on the ground instead. He ends up bringing him back to Las Nevadas to heal, and the situation goes from there. A whole lot of angst, with weekly updates because there are a whole lot of pre-written chapters. This one's gonna end up as a monster of *many* hundreds of thousands of words. 50k words are up so far, but we've got around 300k words of prewritten content, so now wouldn't be a bad time to jump on the bandwagon!

ANYWAY, me being a shameless sellout aside, i'll see you guys next chapter!! :D

End Notes

Kudos and comments are very much appreciated!

Please feel free to join the [discord server](#)! You'll get updates as to the status of how the writing is going and also when I do publish, the chapter update emails get sent out with a delay so if you join you get notified of updates like an hour earlier. We're also just cool!

And here's my [Twitter](#) And [Tumblr](#), if you wanna drop me a follow—more importantly, though, follow [megaronii](#), who's been a huge help for the writing of this fic and is very very cool!

People seem to be making fanart for the fic, so I've decided to make a tag! Please, if you post fanart of the fic anywhere, both mention me in it (@cursewormmm on Twitter, @accursed-worm on Tumblr, @_curseworm on Instagram) and use the hashtag #tlgofanart (for 'the lights go out')!!

That's **#tlgofanart** for fanart of the fic!!

Said fanart is all linked in the notes of the relevant chapter, but [here's](#) a Twitter moment I made with all of it that's posted on Twitter!

Please go check it out and give the amazing artists some love!!

Works inspired by this one

[Knock the Ice from My Bones](#) by [MollyPollyKinz](#)

[New \(Old\) Clothes](#) by [afeatherinthewind](#)

[Defying Gravity \[HIATUS\]](#) by [stardustcoral](#)

[Welcome \(I've Come\) Home, Brother](#) by [Optimal_ok \(achrostynx\)](#)

[You'll Live, I Promise](#) by [ac0n1t3](#)

[it's too cold outside \(for angels to fly\)](#) by [orphan_account](#)

[I Hope This Letter Finds You Well](#) by [orphan_account](#)

[When was the last time you saw the sky?](#) by [AreusWritesFanfic](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!